Evangelization, in the experience of missionaries, catechists and liturgists, is immensely enriched by drawing upon the insights and rituals of popular religiosity. In diverse cultural milieus, pastoral agents are discovering that their task of announcing the Gospel is facilitated and enhanced through the creative use of popular ritual and dramatics. In a word, folk religious practices are a resource for evangelization awaiting full exploration.

Often culturally unique, local traditions and pageants can creatively portray core themes of Christianity and biblical faith. Such inculturated proclamation originates in the encounter of life and faith; it is then celebrated through the pageantry and festivity of popular religiosity. This approach to liturgy and evangelization enables communities to artistically portray their lived Christian identity.

Lively expressions of a community’s faith-life need not raise undue anxieties about dogmatic orthodoxy or faithfulness to biblical texts. On the contrary, popular forms of piety should be welcomed as tools of evangelization, because dramatics, pageantry, socio-religious rituals and festivity can often constitute, in themselves, an actual proclamation of biblical faith!

Pope Paul VI’s famous apostolic exhortation on evangelization in the modern world devoted a lengthy section to the role that popular piety should play in announcing the Good News. While noting its possible limitations, the pope optimistically asserted that “if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values; . . . one must be sensitive to it, know how to perceive its interior dimensions and undeniable values. . . . When

it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ."

RESURRECTION RITUALS IN THE FIESTA ISLANDS

The story is told that one Easter St. Peter noticed that many Filipinos were absent from heaven. Upon inquiry, he discovered that they all had returned to earth to celebrate the Resurrection festivities in their own hometowns. This humorous tale captures the magnetic quality of the Easter ritual, known locally as the "meeting"; it dramatizes the encounter of the risen Christ and his mother on Easter morning.²

In the darkness before the crack of dawn, two processions begin wending their way through the streets of the town. Literally, several hundreds join the activities which begin around 4:00 a.m.

One procession is composed of the townsmen. This all-male group follows the statue of the risen Christ, clad in gold-embroidered white silk and holding his victory standard. The statue is borne aloft by young men who consider it a unique privilege to be chosen to carry the risen Jesus.

Another procession, composed of the women of the town, follows the statue of the sorrowful mother (*mater dolorosa*). She is in mourning, her face covered by a black veil; her hands are clasped in sorrow. The sober mood of Good Friday dominates the two processions.

Both groups, praying and singing as they follow their separate routes, emerge into the town square where additional crowds are waiting. With coordinated movements, they simultaneously approach the arch of "meeting." The first light of dawn is breaking; the little male and female angels are positioned around the arch; flowers and decorations abound.

A white-clad angel is lowered ever so carefully from the pulleys inside the arch. She intones the *Regina Caeli Laetare, Alleluia*; then, to the accompaniment of the band, all the choirs of angels on the arch break into their Easter chants. At the end of their sing-

² This ritual is popular throughout the entire country; each region and ethnolinguistic group has its own terminology to describe the event: *salubong* (Tagalog), *pagsugat* (Cebuano), *sabet* (Ilocano), *tonton* (Bicolano), and *abet-abet* (Pangasinan).
ing, the lead angel slips her finger through a ring atop the Virgin Mother’s black veil. As the angel is slowly raised up on the arch, she removes the veil and reveals the gleaming ivory face of the Virgin. Mary meets her risen Son — to the wild, yet prayerful, enthusiasm of the expectant crowd. The band strikes up a rousing anthem and the faithful enter the church to continue celebrating in Word and Sacrament the Easter liturgy. Christ is truly risen!

DRAMATIZED — YET AUTHENTIC — FAITH AND PROCLAMATION

The foregoing scene of resurrection encounter — meeting the risen Jesus — is true proclamation in pageantry, drama, and song. It is eminently faithful to the gospel narratives of the resurrection, which themselves can be understood as “faith dramas.”

A survey of the appearances of the risen Jesus reveals a rich variety in the different scriptural accounts by the evangelists; they were addressing different communities with unique theological interests and purposes. Despite great divergence in the details, each author seeks to communicate the same fundamental experience: the crucified one is risen and alive! Surely, this was also the Virgin Mary’s experience.³

New Testament exegetes (e.g. Dodd, Lane, Léon-Dufour) detect the presence of a pattern in most resurrection encounters.⁴ The Gospels are perceived to include five paradigmatic elements in their narratives:

(a) The mood is one of confusion, sadness, fear, disappointment, despondency; Jesus’ followers are in darkness and their minds are clouded (Lk 24: 21; Jn 20: 11, 20: 19; Mk 16: 3).

(b) The initiative for the encounter comes from Jesus; he accompanies the disciples wandering in their confusion (Lk 24: 15; Jn 20: 19, 21: 4; Mt 28: 9, 28: 18).

(c) There is a word of greeting or a gesture of peace (Jn 20: 19, 20: 26;


Mt 28:9; Lk 24:36).
(e) A mission command from Jesus concludes the encounter (Mt 28:18-20, 28:10; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:48; Jn 20:17, 20:21, 21:15 ff.).

A retracing of this biblical-liturgical-catechetical paradigm of the resurrection is now possible in tandem with the dramatic “meeting”/“encounter” that Filipino popular religiosity celebrates early on Easter morn. In fact, the parallelism is almost self-evident:

(a) Darkness reigns as the drama begins to unfold before dawn; it appears that the gloom and hopelessness of death have been victorious. Mary is weeping.
(b) Jesus draws near to his friends wandering through the streets of town; the dual processions present Jesus looking for his sorrowful mother.
(c) Jesus’ word of greeting is placed on the lips of the interpreting angel: “Rejoice, O Queen of Heaven, Alleluia.”
(d) The climactic moment of recognition is the central focus; Mary’s black veil of sadness is removed to reveal her joyful face carved from polished ivory; her facial expression proclaims: “It is the Lord”!
(e) The crowds move into the church to hear the scriptures proclaim their mandate to be witnesses of the resurrection; the sacrament of the Eucharist empowers the faithful for their mission.

Reflection further reveals that the biblical pattern of resurrection encounter, so poignantly dramatized in the inculturated Easter pageantry found throughout the Philippines, is a catechetical paradigm of our own Christian experience. We so often walk in darkness, failing to recognize the reality of Christ among us; he calls us by name to acknowledge his living presence; we need word and sacrament to heal our blindness; when we recognize that he lives, we are impelled into mission to announce the Good News to all creation.

IMPETUS FOR INCULTURATED EVANGELIZATION

Commenting on the religious dramatization that surrounds Easter in the Philippines, a Filipino author has correctly noted
that the Easter Encounter is "the very crown of the Filipino's Semana Santa [Holy Week]." 5 This is a compliment to ordinary people's valid intuitions and insight into scriptural faith; for them, as for St. Paul, meeting and recognizing the risen Lord is central: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and your believing it is also in vain" (1 Cor 15:14).

Taking their cue from each local church's genius (the Philippine expression is only one example), catechists, evangelizers, and theologians must continue searching for more effective tools of exegesis and inculturated proclamation to announce Christ's living presence. Creative cultural expression ought to address the need of every generation to be "re-evangelized" in its attitudes, motivations, and values. Indigenous proclamation seeks to overcome the split between faith and culture that challenges all societies — be they in first, second, or third world countries.

In a word, then, renewed examination of the role of dramatics, art, song, dance, pageantry, and festivity can certainly be a unique key to making the faith truly alive in people's hearts, imaginations, and daily experiences. These tools can rescue proclamation from the heavily verbal mode (which often dominates in parish catechesis and liturgy). Such creative evangelization effectively reaches a wide audience of diverse ages and backgrounds.

On Easter Sunday ask any Filipino — even a four-year-old child — and you will hear: "Jesus is alive! I saw him meet his mother; Mary is happy and smiling"! Without doubt, here is living liturgy and proclamation! Here is inculturation!