Every Wednesday, motorists in Metro Manila try to avoid the heavy traffic around the Baclaran church of the Redemptorists. Surprisingly, the general attitude is not one of irritation but tolerance or even sympathy. The prayer and penance of more than 300,000 pilgrims speak a body language that proclaims a popular piety palpably radiating from an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known there as the Ina ng Laging Saklolo. The pilgrims come in tricycles from neighboring districts and in buses and jeepneys from all points of Luzon, as far north as Ilocandia and as far south as Bicolandia. Some pilgrims from Visayas and Mindanao are known to fly to Baclaran on Tuesday afternoons to attend the Wednesday services.

About 40 years ago, only a handful of Baclaran residents were aware of this icon. By 1967, the crowds attracted by the icon had grown enough to merit mention in the Catholic Encyclopedia that reported an average daily attendance of 80,000 to 100,000.\(^1\) Since then, it has more than trebled. What is the explanation of this phenomenon?

According to Levi Blaquera, caretaker of the icon, many come to ask for favors, but very many more keep coming out of gratitude for favors already received and continue to be received, favors that they believe to be miraculous. Popular piety at Baclaran perceives that this icon is something special.

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History confirms the perceptions of popular piety. For 14 centuries now, a document has existed that furnishes a clue to the apostolic origin of this icon. According to Theodore the Lector, church historian of the sixth century, the original design was attributed to St. Luke the evangelist. Luke’s design, named Hodegitria, became the prototype of other Marian icons that have since become famous for protecting peoples in Eastern Europe in the times of ethnic hostilities in 1187, 1261 and 1453.

One Hodegitria icon named Our Lady of Kazan that used to be venerated in Russia in the centuries before 1917 was for a time enshrined at Fatima as though waiting to be returned to Russia. Today in Poland, one Hodegitria icon named Our Lady of Częstochowa is a center of popular piety that it has been for centuries. In Rome, another Hodegitria icon is venerated in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore and another in the Redemptorist church of San Alfonso. A replica of the latter now appears in the Redemptorist church in Baclaran, and pilgrims there share in the worldwide bounty of Hodegitria favors.

Very probably, Baclaran pilgrims are not aware that the Hodegitria icon has recently emerged as an important font of papal discernment. A letter from the Vatican dated May 31, 1991, addressed by Pope John Paul II to his brother-bishops in Europe, concludes with a very significant reference to the Hodegitria:

"Entrusting these sentiments and hopes to the intercession of the Virgin Theotokos, venerated in the East and in the West, that as the Hodegitria she may guide all Christians on the path of the Gospel and of full communion, I gladly impart my special Apostolic Blessing to you, dear Brothers in theEpiscopate, and to the communities entrusted to your care."

Why is this reference so significant? Two events come to mind: the assassination attempt on the Pope’s life and the “full communion” he anticipates and discusses in the body of his letter. The imaginary line connecting these two events seems to trace a historical path for future decades — a path that is being suggested to Wojtyla by the Hodegitria. (“Hodegitria” is a Greek word meaning “guide to the path.”)

On May 13, 1981, an attempt was made on Wojtyla’s life and he survived it. Popular piety spontaneously perceived this as a miracle and attributed it to the sakolo of the Blessed Virgin, for she had appeared at Fatima on May 13, 1917. John Paul openly accepted this verdict of popular piety by going on a thanksgiving pilgrimage to Fatima on May 13, 1982.  

Will he also respond to the popular clamor to consecrate Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in a liturgical ceremony that includes the Russian Orthodox bishops? This may be implied in the “sentiments and hopes” contained in his letter addressed to all his brother-bishops in Europe. Essentially, the Orthodox bishops are included.

Sometime in the early 1940s, an exiled Russian girl Natacha Derfelden was reported to have been told by Sister Lucia that the conversion of Russia would be achieved “through the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Rite.” However, the interpretation given by Sister Lucia to Pope Pius XII in 1939 did not explicitly include the Orthodox bishops. Nor would the 1991 status of negotiations be clear enough to encourage Orthodox and Catholic bishops to come together in a liturgical rite to consecrate Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. To bureaucrats immersed in the ethnic hostilities in Eastern Europe, Wojtyla’s “sentiments and hopes” would appear merely as sentimental optimism.

But the Pope is optimistic that a way will be found and the Hodegitria will point to the Way. In her icon, she is shown with her right hand pointing to the Santo Niño on her left arm. This

8. Ibid. 87-88.
alliance\textsuperscript{10} between Mother and Child gives iconographic grounds for optimism.

Even prescinding from popular iconography, it must surely be obvious to geopolitical analysts aiming at world peace that peace is meaningless unless it becomes a matter of \textit{ultimate} concern for all ethnic groups. The big stumbling block for geopolitics is its vagueness about what is “ultimate.” It cannot see how the Gospel values of defenselessness and forgiveness can logically be included in matters of ultimate concern. And so peace-keeping forces put all their hopes in military hardware to prevent ethnic hatreds from igniting a conflagration or at least control it with police presence. Popular iconography is considered irrelevant as a realistic program for world peace.

In contrast, the Hodegitria as verbalized at Fatima is pointing to a liturgy of collegial consecration as the initial point of a concrete program for world peace. Hence the Fraternal Catholic-Orthodox Exchanges written by Pope John Paul II on May 31, 1991, begins with these words: “As preparations for the forthcoming Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops intensify, I would like to share with you my joy at the new situation which is emerging in Central and Eastern Europe in particular.”\textsuperscript{11}

Joy? Does the situation now emerging in Central and Eastern Europe suggest reasons for joy? Does it not rather suggest reasons for grief? The Pope’s letter mentions some of these: confiscation of Catholic churches in favor of Orthodox ownership, violent proselytism, political persecutions, acts of injustice.\textsuperscript{12} Some of these erupted during the months following the publication of the Pope’s letter of “joy.”

In his letter, the Pope shows that he is perfectly aware of all these “wounds left by the painful experiences of the past.”\textsuperscript{13} He shares in the “distress” felt by his predecessors in the petrine office: in the rightful importance given by both Catholic and

\textsuperscript{10} This term was used by Pope John Paul II in his Angelus Address of Sept. 15, 1985, and discussed in the book entitled \textit{The Alliance of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary} (Manila: Salesian Publishers, 1988) 353 and \textit{passim}. The term affirms a relation and one function of this is suggested by “Hodegitria.”

\textsuperscript{11} John Paul II, “Fraternal Catholic-Orthodox Exchanges,” 172.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 173.

\textsuperscript{13} Loc. cit.
Orthodox theologians to episcopal collegiality, no clarity can yet be discerned about petrine primacy.¹⁴

But John Paul remains optimistic that the fraternal exchanges are tending “towards full ecclesial communion in accordance with the will of Christ for his Church.”¹⁵ Equally optimistic are the Baclaran pilgrims who are hardly aware of the problems facing the Pope’s diplomatic corps. Diplomatic complexities of global dimensions have now begun to include dialogues with Gorbachev¹⁶ and then with Yeltsin,¹⁷ but these are hardly ever a topic of conversation among Luzon pilgrims as they meet each other on Wednesdays in buses and jeepneys headed for the Baclaran icon. These pilgrims are made up of many ethnic groups, whether Ilocano, Tagalog, Bicol or Visayan. But their harmony in their Marian piety is in contrast with the ethnic hostilities wounding peoples of Eastern Europe. Baclaran pilgrims however know that saklolo will perpetually flow from the Hodegitria to heal the world of its wounds. Someday, they will also realize that their Wednesday pilgrimages of prayer and penance are much more meaningful than they now imagine. As they fix their eyes with love and hope and faith on the Hodegitria icon, without understanding what this Greek word means, they firmly believe with Pope John Paul II that she will show the way along which the world is being invited by the Lord of history.

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 110. Paul felt “deep distress” that petrine primacy is not rightly understood as the service desired by God to be rendered by the “Servant of the servants of God.”


¹⁶ According to Howard Q. Dee, former ambassador of the Philippines to the Vatican, Gorbachev, after dismantling the Soviet communist empire, said that the 1991 events in Eastern Europe “would not have been possible without the presence of this Pope,” in *Mankind’s Final Destiny* (Manila: Assisi Development Foundation, 1993) 24.

¹⁷ “Boris Yeltsin Meets Pope John Paul,” in *The Tablet* (Jan. 4, 1992) 22. Before the meeting, Yeltsin had received the complaints of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksei II who felt slighted by the Catholic Archbishop Kondrusiewicz. In a response published in *The Tablet* for Jan. 30, 1993, p. 147, the Pope said that “the way to realise the unity of Christians is not by proselytism but by fraternal dialogue . . .” John Paul’s appeal to the Hodegitria seeks help to discern the path.