
Once when they were in the environs of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" and then, "and you yourselves, who do you say that I am?" The Christology of the Inarticulate by Fr. Beltran presents to us the answers given by poor Filipinos, specifically the scavengers of "Smokey Mountain," the garbage dump of Tondo, Manila. The book itself is the final, now published form of the doctoral thesis presented by the author to the Gregorian University in Rome. But the contents of the book are the fruit of his "personal journey, a scientific methodology and critical reflection" which he had done alone or with others, especially with the poor people of Tondo.

Fr. Beltran had spent many years working with the scavengers of the garbage dump. With them he had arrived at insights into the deeper meaning of who Jesus is. But during the period that he was working at Smokey Mountain, he was also teaching theology at Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay City. This happy combination of exposure and working with the poor together with his teaching of theology gave Fr. Beltran the valuable and enriching opportunity of translating the dogmatic categories of a Western theology into a language and ways of talking that are intelligible to the poor people of Tondo. There he came face to face with practices of popular piety which, while not really sanctioned by the official Church, are nevertheless meaningful to these poor people. He had to ask himself who Christ is for these Filipinos and what difference he makes in their lives.

Fr. Beltran's book focuses on how Christological dogmas that were formulated many centuries ago in a specific societal and cultural context which was very different from ours can be understood, accepted and confessed by Filipino believers today. It is therefore an attempt to help the Filipino community of faith to "rejoin the theological enterprise through a living and trusting
rethinking of the faith so that Filipino Christians can say to those who brought the faith to them, 'It is no longer because of your words that we believe for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world'” (Jn 4:42; p. ix).

The book contains seven chapters with a prologue and an epilogue. It starts with some “pre-notes” towards a Filipino Christology, reflecting among other things on the “Filipino Face of Christ,” Christology and more specifically the “Christology of the Inarticulate” of which a big part is Folk Catholicism. Already the question of inculturation is introduced which will keep coming up throughout the rest of the book.

The biggest section of the book (chaps. 2-5) is devoted to discussing the methodology of the study and then presenting and reflecting on the results of the study. The main tool used was the survey research by which the author aimed “a) to determine the extent to which the Christian message is known and understood by Filipino believers, and b) to identify the problems and orientations towards a more effective communication of the Christian symbolic universe” (p. 30). Fr. Beltran then focuses in chapter three on the statistical analysis done to reduce the mass of information to manageable proportions. Only those items of the complex statistical measures were discussed which were deemed relevant to the theological interpretation of the results.

Chapter Four reflects systematically on the results of the survey to show the interrelatedness of the mysteries of faith where each article of faith confirms and supports the truth and the meaning of the other doctrines. More specifically the chapter discusses the meaning some significant titles of Jesus in the New Testament have for the Filipino respondents. Chapter five then draws for the reader the picture of what is termed the “Jesus of folk Catholicism.” His survey has shown that classical theological language which is rather precise and abstract is not really understood by many believers, and that judged against the background of the clarity and precisions of the dogmatic definitions of the person and functions of Jesus, the people are inarticulate. That explains the title of the book: The Christology of the Inarticulate.

The next and final section (chaps. 6 and 7) discusses some important themes and issues that Fr. Beltran suggests could provide the point of departure for Christology in the Philippines, and then draws up the points that he offers as the prolegomena of a Filipino Christology.

It is clear that this book was written out of love for the scavengers in Smokey Mountain and out of love for Jesus the Crucified One. It was also written by a missionary and professional theologian who is concerned that the official teachings of the Church should be properly understood and accepted by Filipino believers. It is a carefully thought-out work that should just as carefully be studied by theologians who are serious about, and committed to, developing a Filipino Christology. It is an important work that is highly recommended to the Filipino Christians.
Considering the purpose and nature of his work, Fr. Beltran, as he himself said (p. 204), could only make "introductory remarks concerning Filipino Christology." A great service that he (or some other theologian) can do for the Philippine Church is to flesh-out a full-blown Filipino Christology based on the "prolegomena" he has discussed in chapter seven of his work.

Fr. Beltran gave great importance throughout his work to the need for an inculturated Christology that would "give special attention to the religious sensitivity of Filipinos, to their need for personal and religious experience, and to the rise of nationalistic feelings and aspirations... not only to maintain the real meaning of ecclesial doctrines... but also to clarify how dogmatic pronouncements can become a transforming power in Filipino culture" (p. 261). Fr. Beltran has made a very able and competent start in this project, but it remains the great challenge to Filipino theologians today.

Finally, there is the vexing problem of inculturation and reception — "the perennial validity of dogmatic thought-forms and linguistic structures as these are translated and received into cultures and societies with no exact equivalents for the concepts and categories used" (pp. 88-89). But can inculturation be truly achieved without using the languages of the Filipino people? It is to be hoped that many more theologians will contribute to developing a Filipino Christology no longer written in foreign languages but in our very own tongue.

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The last sentence of this book is printed thus: "And as long as there is a cult devoted to Her, there will be people who will speak with the Goddess face to face." Notice how the pronoun "Her" is capitalized. (Except for this concluding paragraph, pronouns referring to Mary are never capitalized throughout the rest of the book.) In ending this way, the author seems to be affirming his personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, lest some readers suspect him of despising Marian devotion in earlier chapters.

Precisely because of his devotion, he diligently adheres to the important and difficult task of distinguishing fact from pious fiction. Perceptive readers will be convinced that psychoanalytic method and theological discernment can both be fruitful in this interdisciplinary enterprise.

This approach is carried out in two parts subdivided into nine chapters. Part One includes a discussion of the central insight that Oedipal tendencies have a strong influence on religious devotion. This insight, explicitly Freudian, points to a strong, but strongly repressed, desire for the mother in sons, and