WHEN THE TRUTH HURTS
Finding Hope for the Philippines from the Underside of History

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Is it possible for us as Filipinos and as Catholics to find solidarity and hope by acknowledging our history of suffering and by standing tall in it as a people of faith? To answer this, we also have to articulate what it means for us, as Filipinos and as Catholics, to be a people of faith. But just imagining how to begin already fills us with foreboding. Remembering our past, seeing our present, and envisioning our future, many of us wish we were anything but part of the Philippines. After centuries of domination by foreign powers and the servitude imposed on us, the incredible suffering to which we were subjected, and in the wake of the chaos in which we were left, is there anything left in our story for which we can stand tall? Even our religious faith was imposed on us. But telling our story is the only way to answer these questions. To make it easier, let us begin with events in the last three decades.

The Marcos Years

In 1983, the story of the Filipino people had become the story of Ferdinand Marcos. The pride of many Filipinos meant pride in Ferdinand Marcos. His life story had become well known. As a young
student he topped the Philippine bar exam with a perfect score. Then, as a young lieutenant in the resistance during the Japanese occupation, he had performed daring solo feats of bravery. After the war, the grateful American and Filipino governments had showered upon him decoration after decoration. He had married a beauty queen and had become president of the young republic. Then in 1972, to counter the threat of growing disorder and violence, he made the decision to declare martial law, which saved the nation. This, at least, was the story being told during the years of martial law.

Behind this story was the geopolitical reality that, by 1972, the United States had given up on its war in Indochina. As a rearguard action to the expected fall of South Vietnam, it had encouraged Marcos’s declaration of martial law in the Philippines. The Philippine islands lay just a short sea journey off the coast of Vietnam and at that time hosted large US air and naval bases. Martial law under a US-friendly dictator would protect these bases and the US interests which they, in turn, protected.

In the ensuing years of crackdown on dissent, members of the former Filipino democratic opposition, social workers, student leaders, and journalists, languished in jails or fled into exile, were found dead, or simply disappeared. Even a number of priests were also murdered. Under Marcos’s “crony capitalism,” the country languished economically, missing the East Asian boom and falling far behind the young tiger economies of its neighbors. Seeking to flee the hardships of the failing economy, rural folk crowded into the capital city. Destitution increased and sprawling shantytowns of the poor grew up around Metro Manila’s dumpsites. Yet Marcos and his family lived in a style unmatched anywhere in the world except perhaps by the British royal family. But going one better, Marcos ruled by decree under his new constitution. And day after day, year after year, the newspaper with the widest circulation in the country bannered Ferdinand Marcos and the “New Society” he was single-handedly building.
The Beginning of the End of the Dictatorship

The end of Marcos's story began in 1983. Democratic opposition leader Benigno Aquino, self-exiled in the United States, declared his intent to return to the Philippines despite a long-standing threat that if he did he would be killed. Aquino took this threat seriously. He knew that it originated from the highest powers in the homeland. But it no longer deterred him. At some point in his seven years of exile, he had come to believe that his country needed him in a way that would ask of him his life. His murder would reveal to all what Marcos truly was. It would unmask the lie. When asked publicly why he wished to return despite the threats, he answered: "The Filipino is worth dying for." Halfway around the globe, upon hearing these words, Metro Manilans took sides. In massive peaceful defiance against the attempts to keep Aquino in exile, they tied thousands of yellow ribbons of welcome on trees and lampposts in the city.

Benigno Aquino was murdered on the day that he arrived, in broad daylight, on the tarmac of the airport. The Filipino military guard, which had boarded Aquino's plane and had escorted him off, had immediately produced the bullet-riddled body of a civilian whom they claimed was the "communist hit man" who had killed Aquino. They thereby claimed innocence for themselves and for the dictatorship. The dictator, backed by the US for eleven years and reading his own praises in the news everyday, had grown used to his power. When Aquino's family took his body for burial, they passed through streets still lined with yellow ribbons.

Overt discontent with the dictatorship immediately grew. More and more Filipinos rallied around Corazon Aquino, Benigno Aquino's widow. At first the object of sympathy, she had courageously stepped forward as the unlikely leader of this new opposition. The now poignant yellow ribbon came to symbolize its hopes. The words spoken in memory of Benigno became its rallying cry: "You are not alone." The aspirations of the new movement found voice in Catholic schools and Catholic churches, as well as in many non-governmental organizations. Three years later, this unarmed but highly conscientized
citizenry faced en masse the dictator’s military might on the streets of the capital city.

Not the First Time

This was not the first time in Philippine history that large numbers of unarmed civilians had faced armed troops who had orders to fire. The first time occurred in 1899 under US rule, after the US had purchased the Philippines from Spain. Beginning in 1899, supposedly to quell an ill-equipped Filipino struggle for independence, US troops killed at least 600,000 Filipinos within the space of two years on the island of Luzon alone.¹ Men, women, and children—and the towns and villages in which they lived—were systematically wiped out. US soldiers wrote home testifying to the holocaust. On 27 February 1899, Captain Elliott, of the Kansas Regiment, wrote:

Caloocan was supposed to contain seventeen thousand inhabitants. The Twentieth Kansas swept through it, and now Caloocan contains not one living native. Of the buildings, the battered walls of the great church and dismal prison alone remain. The village of Maypaja, where our first fight occurred on the night of the fourth, had five thousand people on that day—now not one stone remains upon top of another. You can only faintly imagine this terrible scene of desolation.²

Clearly, this was no two-sided war, despite the fact that the events of 1899-1902 have until recently been called “The Filipino Insurrec-

¹The total number of Filipino dead has been estimated to be as high as 2,000,000. The number 600,000 for Luzon alone comes from the estimate of US Gen. Bell in a 3 May 1901 interview with the New York Times. Gen. Bell estimated that 1 out of every 6 Filipinos on Luzon had been killed or died as a result of the war. The population of Luzon at that time was estimated at 3,727,488. See Moorfield Storey and Julian Codman, Secretary Root’s Record: “Marked Severities” in Filipino Warfare (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis Co., 1902) 26.

tion" by US historians and now "The Philippine-American War" by both US and Filipino historians.

Anthony Michea, of the Third Artillery, wrote: "We bombarded a place called Malabon, and then we went in and killed every native we met, men, women, and children." The term "war" does not describe the fact that, alongside a pathetically outgunned Filipino struggle for independence, genocide was perpetrated by US troops against the Filipino people.

One soldier from Nebraska did the rare thing and protested bluntly against the so-called "war":

We came here to help, not to slaughter, these natives; to fight the oppressor Spain, not the oppressed. It strikes me as not very fair to pursue a policy that leads to this insurrection, and then keep us volunteers out here to fight battles we never enlisted for.4

Indeed, if the worst US military setback during 1899-1902 occurred when a corvée of Filipinos who had been conscripted to clear the jungle turned the machetes—which US troops had assigned to them—upon the Americans themselves,5 then we may surmise that the 4,234 American dead in two years of fighting was not due to a very two-sided "war." Moreover, the historically accepted date of 1902—when Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Filipino independence movement, was captured—as the end of the "insurrection" or "war," ignores the fact that massacres of civilians continued until 1913.6

3Ibid., 12.
4Ibid., 4.
5The so-called Balangiga massacre. The Filipinos attacked the Americans with machetes, despite the fact that the Americans possessed firearms. The result was called a "massacre" of US troops, despite the fact that more Filipino lives were lost in the melee than American. See Storey and Codman, 29-32.
6For example, US troops massacred some 600 Filipino Muslims—men, women, and children—on the southern island of Mindanao in 1906. The
A letter from the wife of a US officer in the Philippines, written at his behest, bluntly testified to the genocidal nature of the "war." The excerpt begins on a note of ironic reproach, apparently made in response to rumors in the US homeland that the war in the Philippines was no war at all:

The present war is no bloodless, fake, opera bouffe engagement. Our men have been relentless, have killed to exterminate men, women, and children, prisoners and captives, active insurgents and suspected people, from lads of ten up, an idea prevailing that the Filipino was little better than a dog, a noisome reptile in some instances, whose best disposition was the rubbish heap. Our soldiers have pumped salt water into men "to make them talk," have taken prisoners of people who had held up their hands and peacefully surrendered, and, an hour later, without an atom of evidence to show that they were even insurrectos, stood them up on a bridge, and shot them down one by one to drop into the water below and float down as examples to those who found their bullet-loaded corpses. 7

Among the savageries practiced by US troops cited in this letter was that of subjecting Filipinos to water torture. The avowed aim was "to make them talk."

But referring to this practice, a letter from Clarence Clowe, a soldier from Seattle, indicated that, despite the military rubric of information gathering, US troops acted with motives far from military: "Nor can it be said that there is any general repulsion on the part of the enlisted men to taking part in these doings. I regret to have to say that, on the contrary, the majority of soldiers take a keen

Filipinos fled their village when they found out that US troops were approaching. The troops pursued them and trapped them in the crater of an extinct volcano. The Americans took positions around the rim of the crater and fired down for three days. Only one young girl survived. This author does not know what then happened to her.

7Quoted in Storey and Codman, 27.
delight in them..." And as Colonel Funston, of the Twentieth Kansas Volunteers, noted: "The boys go for the enemy as if they were chasing jack-rabbits..." As Colonel Gardener, the American governor of Tayabas province, observed: "Almost without exception, soldiers, and also many officers, refer to the natives in their presence as 'niggers'; and the natives are beginning to understand what the word 'nigger' means."

Clarence Clowes also noted that US troops accosted Filipino civilians in their own homes and, in the face of frantic pleas for mercy from family members, subjected their victims to water torture. Clowes wrote:

At any time I am liable to be called upon to go out and bind and gag helpless prisoners, to strike them in the face, to knock them down when so bound, to bear them away from wife and children, at their very door, who are shrieking pitifully the while, or kneeling and kissing the hands of our officers, imploring mercy from those who seem not to know what it is, and then, with a crowd of soldiers, hold our helpless victim head downward in a tub of water in his own yard, or bind him hand and foot, attaching ropes to head and feet, and then lowering him into the depths of a well of water till life is well-nigh choked out, and the bitterness of a death is tasted, and our poor, gasping victims ask us for the poor boon of being finished off, in mercy to themselves.

This would not be the last time in Philippine history that Filipino families would bear helpless witness to the suffering of loved ones or that whole families would be massacred in large numbers.

The next large massacre of innocent civilians occurred just a generation later, during World War II. In 1945, Japanese occupation

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8Quoted in Storey and Codman, 78.
9Soldiers' Letters, 10.
10Quoted in Storey and Codman, 67.
11Quoted in Storey and Codman, 78.
troops were pulling out of the country. Though already leaving behind a record of murder, pillage, and rape, to make sure that the Philippines would have a hard time recovering from the war, the retreating troops executed any Filipino they could find who possessed a university education. There are still Filipinos alive today who remember older relatives being dragged out into the streets and shot. Then, as approaching US forces bombarded Manila, another one million Filipinos lost their lives.

The EDSA Revolution

We come to 1986, the fourteenth year of martial law under Ferdinand Marcos. On the streets of Metro Manila, a third generation of civilians faced troops who had orders to fire. But this generation would make a stand. They had heard the words of Benigno Aquino: "The Filipino is worth dying for." In three days and four nights, a peaceful revolt of three million people—backed by the hierarchy of the Catholic church of the Philippines and armed only with memories, prayers, and hope—toppled the US-backed military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Those days were days of spirit and grace unmatched in the history of the modern world. One after the other, helicopter gunships, tanks, fighter jets, and battle-hardened troops were sent against the people. One by one, these forces encountered the crowds that met them in peace but did not give ground. One by one, the military forces refused their orders to fire and turned back. Many defected. The dictator and his family fled into US exile. The outside world, which was watching, expressed amazement. But most grateful and amazed of all were Filipinos. An event unprecedented in Philippine history had just occurred. The Archbishop of Manila expressed the popular feeling well: "When God wants to make his home among a people, he gives them a story to tell." A new story had begun for the Filipino people.

The story of Ferdinand Marcos was one of human greed and lust for power backed by a superpower's habitual trampling of a people. Marcos's rule turned life into a burden and a curse for many Filipino
families. His dynastic visions and US backing stretched this curse endlessly into the future. The peaceful revolution of 1986 was our stand against this diminishment of our being. It was our stand for life. The Philippines has had a long history of suffering, but with the revolution of 1986, our country has set out upon a new journey. We can dare to dream of a better Philippines for ourselves and for our children. And we can dare to live our story within the stories of the People of God.

Looking Toward the Future

Nonetheless, we are by no means in a safe place yet. Massive poverty continues to worsen. At least one out of every three Filipinos is destitute. Extreme disparities mark the difference between the lives of the rich and the lives of the poor. A culture of patronage and corruption still undermines the institutions meant to be vehicles of social redress and social change. Millions of Filipinos brave loneliness, alienation, and second-class lives as contract or undocumented workers abroad, so that they may support families and loved ones back home. An untold number of these millions suffer physical and emotional abuse at the hands of their employers. Not all the grievances of our Muslim minority have been met. A continuous migration to the developed world drains our country of its small middle class, that class of people who have acquired the knowledge and skills that can help our country the most. In this situation of inadequacy and weakness, we face the challenges of globalization.

These problems have no easy solution. We have won for ourselves a government that is democratic in form, but fails to alleviate the hopelessness and systemic alienation felt by many. Any real solutions need to be for the long term. Hopefully, there are points where real solutions begin. These are points in the heart. Our country has moved to a new stage in its history, a point in its story beyond the oppression of the Marcos years, but it needs people, like Benigno Aquino and the people of the 1986 revolution, who will also live new stories for it, stories of renewed commitment and faith.
What could it mean then, for us Filipinos at this point in our history, to live a story of faith and commitment to our people? Benigno Aquino and the people of 1986 showed us the way. They showed us care for our fellow citizens and sacrifice for the sake of the next generation, even if we ourselves should risk suffering. This way shows us the goodness that is possible in this world when we are graced agents of a covenant of hope. Yet this way is not new to us. It has long found nurture in those traditions of Catholicism that have been emphasized in our practice of the faith.

Retrospect

In this regard, Fr. Anscar J. Chupungco notes in his book, *Liturgical Inculturation*, that though various Filipino popular devotions originated in Spain, a peculiar set of devotions found emphasis in the Philippines. Filipino folk devotion emphasizes the Christ Child, the Suffering Christ, and the Blessed Virgin. Consider ing that much of traditional Catholic devotion includes the celebration of Easter and Pentecost and devotion to the saints, Filipino folk emphasis on the Incarnation, Passion, and Mother of Jesus is indeed peculiar. Chupungco finds it necessary to explain the first two:

The National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines admits that the Christ of Filipino folk Catholicism is predominantly the Santo Niño [Holy Child], and the suffering Christ. The risen Christ does not occupy as significant a place in the devotional life of ordinary Catholics. In so many words the Directory justifies this peculiarity when it points out “the ‘scandal’ of both the Infant and the Crucified Christ is grounded in the Good News itself.” It observes that a great number of Filipinos see in the Child Jesus the God who made himself accessible, and in the crucified, more than in the risen Christ, a clearer and more powerful sign of God’s love.  


13Ibid., 105-6.
In this devotion to the Incarnation and the Passion, it is not difficult to discern the Filipinos’ source of spiritual strength during their long history of suffering.

Most notable in this regard is a homegrown devotion, the Payon:

Indigenous to the Philippines is the chanting before home altars during Lent or, less frequently, at funeral wakes, of the verses of the Payon. The Payon is a book written in seven major Filipino languages consisting of 3,150 rhymed stanzas of five lines each. Though it narrates the history of salvation from the moment of creation to the second coming of Christ, including apocryphal stories, much of it is a detailed account of and a prayerful meditation on the passion of Christ. Friends and neighbors drop in to sing a portion of the Payon and sit afterwards for a meal, which still vaguely retains a sacral undertone.¹⁴

For us Filipinos, the Christian way is the way of the cross. Indeed then, Benigno Aquino and the people of 1986, who put their lives on the line for the sake of God’s reign, lived out for us a faith which we have long known and have, in a way, made fully our own.

Irish poet and Nobelist in literature Seamus Heaney, in his essay “The Redress of Poetry,” reflects on this phenomenon of appropriated texts. What quality do such texts have that allow their appropriation? Here Heaney speaks of poetry, but his insight readily extends to all forms of literature, including biblical texts, whose truths are conveyed with an aesthetic sense:

It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. The Divine Comedy is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfactory comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse,

¹⁴Tbid., 104.
before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.\textsuperscript{15}

Heaney goes on to describe this empowerment: "There is sensation both of arrival and of prospect, so that one does indeed seem to 'recover a past' and 'prefigure a future,' and thereby to complete the circle of one's being. When this happens, we have a distinct sensation that... poetry is 'strong enough to help'..."\textsuperscript{16}

Applying Heaney's insight to the Filipino experience, Filipinos have appropriated and nourished those points of resonance in the Catholic tradition and in the Bible that have been "strong enough to help." That is, those points which correspond to our reality. Those points turn out to be at the very heart of the faith itself: Incarnation and Passion, the beginning and the end of the life of Christ—the way of the cross in its deepest sense. Moreover, in the tradition, the Blessed Virgin accompanied Christ on this way—from beginning to end—and pondered things in her heart. This way means affirming life even in the face of death. As the author of the Gospel of Mark knew, deep within the heart that makes this choice shines the mysterious vision of the transfiguration. In 1986, the Filipino people showed this truth to the world.

**Retrospect on Biblical History**

We do well to consider how the histories of the Bible and of the Filipino people have intertwined. Here follows one possible reason for the deep appropriation of the biblical faith by the Filipino people. Behind the Bible itself is another story of deep suffering and transcendent hope, themes that resonate with our own as a people.


\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 9.
Ancient Palestine lay on the land route between Egypt, to the southwest, and Mesopotamia, to the northeast. The annual flooding of the Nile—that great fresh water river running the length of Egypt—allowed wide and systematic agriculture, thereby supporting a large and relatively prosperous Egyptian population. To the east, the Tigris and Euphrates ran the length of Mesopotamia, supporting large and prosperous populations there. As a result, Egypt and Mesopotamia were the two great power centers of the ancient Near East; they were the superpowers of the ancient world. People and goods passed back and forth between them on routes that ran on either side of the rugged hill country of Palestine. And during “world” wars, huge armies marched through.

Because of the strategic significance of the region, both Israel and Judah, along with other neighboring small kingdoms, experienced some form of foreign subjugation during most of their existence. Egyptian sway gave way to Assyrian domination, then Babylonian, then Persian, then Greek, and then finally Roman. More than the march of traders and their goods, Israel and Judah knew the march of foreign armies and their destruction. Israel itself disappeared as a kingdom in 721 BCE at the hands of the Assyrian army. Judah would suffer similar destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in 587-86 BCE, although it would rise again as a semi-independent entity seventy years later with the advent of the Persians. It was against this backdrop of suffering and struggle that the sacred texts of Israel and Judah were written and became, in the end, the Old Testament of our Bible.

In this case, the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the ensuing forced exile of Judeans to Babylon in 587-86 BCE were the catalysts that began the transformation of traditional writings into a single sacred book. Henceforth, this book would impart the religious identity that was once found in the centralized cult of the Jerusalem temple. This remained the case even when a second temple was re-dedicated in 516 BCE. The possession of a single book in turn influenced the shape of future utterances of the divine and provided some sensibility for what would and would not henceforth be included in
the book. The book became the sacred book of the Jews and was the sacred book of the first Christians, who saw themselves as Jews. In turn, the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE by Roman soldiers, the rejection of Christians by Jewish communities, and the persecution of Christians in different parts of the Roman empire were the catalysts for the formation of the New Testament. Out of this story of devastation, catastrophe, persecution, and of transcendent hope, Old and New Testaments together come to us as the Bible.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{The Biblical Faith has Spoken for the Filipino People}

Let us return to 1983. Benigno Aquino had just been murdered. It seemed that the rule of Marcos and his family would last forever. But in December of that year, Filipino Catholic bishops consecrated the nation to Mary. Filipinos went to their churches and put themselves under Mary’s protection. It was a sublimely subversive move. The faith tradition identifies Mary as the woman in the book of Revelation who stands on the moon and is crowned with twelve stars (see Rev 12:1). As theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz have noted, the apocalyptic apprehension of reality relegates even the most hardened status quo to provisional status. One year later, in 1984, there followed a Filipino Marian Year. Conscienticization of the people was the priority.

What was the motive behind all this? For many Filipino Catholics, Mary of our folk tradition was the one to whom we brought our hopes and our wounds. Both this apocalyptic apprehension and simple cry came together in the national act of consecration. In the Gospel of Luke, it is precisely when Mary is identified as the harbinger of hope that her role as champion of the oppressed is revealed. Eliza-

\textsuperscript{17}See James A. Sanders, \textit{Torah and Canon} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) esp. 5-8, 50-51, 53, 91-92.
beth, long suffering unjust social disdain because of her inability to conceive, asks in wonder on being greeted by Mary: “[H]ow does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy” (Lk 1:43-44). And on hearing Elizabeth’s own strange, wonderful news that she is pregnant, Mary breaks into a song of thanksgiving, a song that portends against all forms of social injustice:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is from age to age
to those who fear him.
He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,
According to his promise to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever (Lk 1:46-55).

In the national act of consecration, we Filipinos entrusted ourselves to these promises. We did the rational thing, the human thing: faced with either hope or despair, we chose hope.

Corazon Aquino was first among the people in this consecrated choice. It was with and among people such as these—people who know loss, who weep, who seek solidarity with those who suffer, who share visions of hope in their pain, and who make a stand for justice by putting their own lives on the line—that the Holy Spirit would make its stand, treasuring and protecting and giving strength. These were the people who put the Marcos dictatorship to shame
during those three days and four nights of grace in February 1986. Around them has grown a folklore of miracle tales.¹⁸

One would normally expect miracle tales to be a product of distance in time and fading recollection. However, even as the revolution unfolded, reports of grace-filled happenings began. On the very first day of the revolution, word spread of the wind that would always rise up and blow the tear gas away from the throng, back into the ranks of the police. The police themselves were the first to speak of it. It filled them with fear and they were the first to defect. And in the days after the dictator’s fall, word spread that brilliant flashes of golden light had blinded jet fighter pilots whenever they had tried to visually fix their target among the people below. That is why, the pilots said—it was they who told the story—they never fired upon the people.

Then there was the homeless man who wished to donate two loaves of bread to the revolution. Radio Veritas, the Catholic station now gone underground, had called for donations of food. This was when we all already knew that this was the revolution and knew we would not leave till it was over. Urged by the people to keep the bread for himself, the man answered: “All my life I have had to receive. Now is my chance to give. The Shepherd told me to give this to you.”

It was fitting that all these events took place on a highway named EDSA: Epifanio de los Santos Avenue. It was indeed a highway of saints in epiphany. There were reports of other grace-filled happenings: vi-

¹⁸Most of these tales are not about events that defy the laws of nature or demand supernatural explanation. Rather, they tell about happy coincidences and deeply moving occurrences, all of which are within the bounds of natural explanation. However, the human mind is amazed to see events of this kind occurring at such crucial times and with such happy results. It is as if they were willed to happen by a good God. In that sense they are “miracle” tales.
sions of Mary, piercing inner insights, conversions of heart. Surprisingly, no one among the civilians at EDSA claimed seeing Mary. Only soldiers commanding tanks, about to implement their orders to attack, abruptly halted, came down, received flowers from the crowd and joined in their prayers, then ultimately withdrew. Afterwards, some of them reported to the Archbishop of Manila that a cross had appeared in the sky and a “beautiful [nun]” had appeared among the crowd and had appealed to them: “Dear soldiers, stop! Do not proceed! Do not harm my children!” This was an appeal not unlike that made by mothers, sisters, and daughters to US soldiers as they dragged Filipino men folk out of their houses to be tortured and summarily executed—except then the frantic pleas fell on deaf ears. Yet the vision of Mary notwithstanding, the majority of Filipino military men refused their orders to attack in 1986 because they obeyed the voice of their conscience. What they and the people did together in grace was the greatest treasure of the revolution. But in this day and age, natural explanations have been sought for the miracle tales. Here follows one possible natural explanation.

We note that the tales have a definitely biblical ring. Divine command of the winds receives mention throughout the Bible. Angels use blinding light to protect Lot and his family from hostile townsfolk in Gen 19:11 and apparently again to defend Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:18. Divine intervention on a grand scale on behalf of an unarmed people facing a hostile military force marks Israel’s escape from Egypt in the story of the Exodus. As for the “Shepherd’s” bread, in the Gospel of John, where Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd” (see Jn 10), the eucharistic bread is identified as the manna with which God fed Israel (see Jn 6). Finally, the archetype of the mother weeping for her children who have been slaughtered occurs in Jer 31:15 as Rachel weeping for Israel, an image which most notably resurfaces in the Gospel of Matthew (see Mt 2:18, the slaughter of the holy innocents). The vision of Mary that appeared to the soldiers on EDSA vaguely recalls this image.

With regard to these biblical echoes, we note that Chupungco’s description of Filipino folk devotions in *Liturical Inculturation* reveals
the constancy and fervor with which Filipino Catholics practice their religion. As a result, given Filipinos’ devoted practice of their religion during the course of ordinary times, it is not surprising that biblical imagery should have suffused people’s perceptions at the psychologically heightened time of the revolution. This is one possible way of explaining these miracle tales.

Nonetheless, one “miraculous” event has etched itself into the historical memory of the Filipino people, and like the name “EDSA” itself, admits of no natural explanation other than that of aesthetically evocative coincidence—the kind of coincidence that marks a people of faith.

As the revolution unfolded from February 21 to 25 in 1986, the readings in the Filipino liturgy moved into the book of Exodus. Outdoor masses were being said daily on the highway where the people had gathered. At the height of the revolution, as jet fighters kept their distance, these words of God to Moses in the book of Exodus beautifully rang out: “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain” (Ex 3:12). This has become known as the miracle of the liturgy. Thus, the historically irreducible point on the meaning of all these things is that in 1984, during the national consecration to Mary, Filipinos spoke their heart with words that echoed Scripture, and in 1986, during the revolution, Scripture “spoke back” to them. A people who had suffused their lives and their history with the practice of their faith worked this “miracle.” On this note we turn to the story of the biblical faith in the Philippines.

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19See Chupungco, 103-8.

20The liturgy draws its readings from Sacred Scripture according to a fixed cycle. This cycle has since been revised; the cycle that is being followed today is no longer the same as the cycle that was being followed in 1986.
The Filipino People Have Lived the Biblical Faith

The Philippines, like ancient Palestine straddling the trade route between Egypt and Mesopotamia, straddled a trade route between great powers. In pre-colonial times, this was the sea route between China and India, the great centers of Asian civilization at that time. With the arrival of the Spaniards, the strategic value of the Philippines only increased. The islands not only sat on the choke point for sea traffic coming out of and going into the Indian Ocean, they also provided first ports for trans-Pacific trade. The islands still retain this strategic value today. Thus, just like the two small kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been in their own time, the Philippines has been subject to foreign domination by the world’s superpowers for most of its history. First came the Spaniards, then briefly the Japanese, then finally the Americans. This foreign domination lasted some 450 years. Only since 1946 has the Philippines been an independent nation (though some argue that true independence was not fully achieved until the US military was forced to leave in 1992).

The Bible came to the Philippines with Spanish colonialists in 1565. It was the start of a long history of subjugation. We received the Catholic faith in servitude. As we learned how to read its sacred book, we were looked down upon as a second-class people. Since then, however, the book has traveled with us through the centuries. Without self-conscious historical intent on the part of Filipinos or on the part of foreign powers, it has become embedded in our history of suffering. This has happened through innumerable instances wherein we turned to the sacred book in times of mourning, in times of supplication, in times of distress. It has traveled with us through the centuries under Spanish rule, through the fourteen years of genocide under American rule when the US took over early in the last century, through the brutalities of the Japanese occupation in World War II, through the decadence and decay of the Marcos years and US military bases. Its meaning for us has been born out of this pathos, as exemplified by the Payon. We have learned how to read the Bible through the eyes of those who are oppressed and who suffer. Thus,
not only has the Bible become embedded in our history, it has become embedded in our memories. As a consequence, from its previous Western context, the book has found a new context among our people. Indeed, it has found more than a context: it has found a home. From its first home in the ancient Near East, it has found a new home in South East Asia. The link is a people who know what it means to suffer and to hope. The dual events of 1983 and 1986 have borne witness to this. The Bible has become our very own book.

This intertwining of Filipino and ancient Israelite histories of faith through the medium of the Bible strengthens the present faith of Filipinos. Theologian Rebecca S. Chopp, summarizing Johann Baptist Metz, points out the empowering possibilities of narrative:

[M]emories constitute the human subject through narrative.... Memories are recalled in narratives, which give our lives a timefulness, a beginning and an end, an experience of history. Narratives form, inform, and transform individuals and communities through traditions, shared values, and concrete solidarities. Solidarity is the timefulness of belonging to our memories and our future, the timefulness of suffering with and for others, the timefulness of freedom as human intersubjectivity.21

This in turn illuminates the dignity and the hope that comes with being a people in communion with each other and for each other according to a shared story and its vision. As Filipino Catholics, we may tentatively describe this story and vision as an ethos that opposes evil with good, neglect with compassion, death with life, because we have faith that love is stronger than death.

Thus we may say that our Catholic tradition and Sacred Scripture have truly become our own, in the process revealing both to us and to the world our dignity as a Filipino people and as a people of faith. This dignity implies self-assertion, but goes beyond narrow self-assertion because finding dignity in the face of degradation requires

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an act of transcendence. This transcendent act is the act of hope. The very act of hope—hope which leaves behind the desire for vengeance and which readily encompasses all that is humane, seeking right communion with the other—bestows a dignity that cannot be taken away even in the face of defeat. Moreover, within this act of hope, the self discovers the dignity of its own integrity and of its inalienable membership in the larger human community. This dignity bestowed and discovered belongs not only to the individual but also to the community. And even if there is only one individual who has this hope, then our own history shows that this individual is already the seed of a new community.

Key to this theology of hope is the notion of covenant. According to the dictionary, a covenant is a "formal, binding agreement." But echoing ethicist and theologian Margaret Farley in her book, Personal Commitments, here "covenant" means God's desire to enter into a relationship with us, to stay beside us, and to see us through to a place of goodness. This kind of covenant addresses itself to those who are most vulnerable, who have least in life and nowhere to go. It accompanies us from here to there—from the place of destitution to the place of fullness. It sees us through when we know we cannot see and when the way seems threatened. It opens our eyes to each other in ways far greater than we alone may be willing to concede. It trea-

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22Our forgiveness notwithstanding, I hold that the US is morally obliged to make reparations for what it has done to the Filipino people. National Socialism in Germany has passed away, yet the German people still recognize for themselves a kind of guilt for the Jewish holocaust of World War II. But the form of US government that committed genocide in the Philippines at the start of the twentieth century—the century of ideologically deodorized genocides—still exists in America today along with its supposed ideals. It must make reparations. I believe that $100 billion immediately, followed by $10 billion a year for the next 1,000 years, adjusted yearly for inflation but not deflation, may be sufficient. The US must also build a holocaust memorial for the Filipino dead in the Washington Mall.

|asures and protects what we discover as most dear. It means seeking faithfulness with each other in our shared journey, in a field of shared things and shared visions, including the vision of God’s future.24 We Filipinos are in mysterious covenant with our God. As a people of faith, we are called to extend this covenant to the world around us in the same spirit in which it has been extended to us. Thus acknowledging our history of suffering, we find solidarity and hope and stand tall as a people of faith.

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