MARY IN PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC LIFE

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"Pueblo amante de Maria" are words found in a eucharistic hymn (written in 1937) often sung in the Philippines when Spanish was more understood than it is at present: "a people devoted to Mary, a people who love Mary." The words speak a truth about our people; it is not just a pious turn of phrase. It has been reported that when President Corazon Aquino met the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, he reminded her that Filipino Catholic people have received a precious gift, not shared by every people: a special closeness to our blessed Lady. The Pope expressed the hope, so it was reported, that Mrs. Aquino would in her person help to keep that special love alive. I am sure that the then President received that gracious urging with readiness, for her life then, as it remains today, is marked by a singular devotion to the Mother of the Lord, and Our Lady’s rosary remains her special devotional practice.

The present Archbishop of Manila, Jaime Cardinal Sin, has more than once remarked that when he calls for the great open-air assemblies for major religious events at our Luneta Park, that for almost all of them he takes the step of asking every parish and church association to send a large delegation to the gathering (the park needs at least fifty thousand people to fill its major area). But for Marian assemblies, he has said, there is never a need to urge people to come in large numbers. They come. "For Mary, they come." For Mary, they come!
MARY AND THE BEGINNING OF PHILIPPINE CATHOLICISM

This special devotion to Mary, this special closeness to her, seems to have been a reality which marked Filipino Catholicism from its very beginnings. There are at least a few studies in the history of the Catholic faith in the Philippines which bear this out, the most developed of which is, probably, Pedro Vasquez Zafe’s *Marian Devotion: Its Role in the Evangelization of the Philippines* (Zafe).¹

It has been written that in all of colonial history, the story of the Christianization of the Philippines is unmatched—in the speed and spread of the reception by a people of the Christian faith.

In the light, then, of impartial history raised above race prejudice and religious prepossessions, after a comparison with the early years of the Spanish conquest in America or with first generation or two of English settlements, the conversion and civilization of the Philippines in the forty years following Legaspi’s arrival must be pronounced an achievement without parallel in history [italics ours] (Bourne, 37).

It is perhaps not as well known that the Mother of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, played an extraordinary role in this remarkably rapid process of Christianization. Five religious orders of men “shared the major burdens of converting the natives” of the islands which became the Philippines: the *Augustinians*, who first came to these islands in 1565; the *Franciscans* in 1577; the *Jesuits* in 1581; the *Dominicans* in 1587; and the *Recollects* in 1606. It is almost incredible how the early missionaries, even if small in numbers, fanned out to all parts of the many Visayan islands and then the largest island, Luzon—from its northern tip to the Bicol region in its south. The southernmost island area, Mindanao, was later also penetrated by missionaries.

These early heralds of the Gospel from the start joined to direct evangelizing work, the running of schools, the care of the sick, establishment and organization of communities, instructing and helping the natives in their agricultural work, running schools for children and in time for adults, caring for the sick and dying (hospitals, asy-
lums), for the poor, and the orphans. They set up printing presses to disseminate their catechisms and books on religious and other subjects of instruction, pamphlets for devotional use. They built roads, bridges and irrigation systems. In all, they engaged in a prodigious amount of missionary work, entering every area of human living, an evangelization effort which was as complete and wide-ranging and far-reaching as their creativity and energies allowed them to undertake.

Men of zeal and dedication from the start discovered a remarkable fact: the natives everywhere "took" very readily to devotion to the Mother of God. Hence, from the beginning, Filipinos were taught and with great readiness adopted practices of Marian devotion: prayed the Rosary specially, joined Marian associations the missionaries organized, venerated Marian images, and those who had acquired reading and writing skills, read devotional treatises and other books on the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Marian shrines were built and multiplied rapidly throughout the islands. Marian images were venerated from the earliest period of evangelization; each image "had its own story to tell": stories of faith and its rewards, stories of devotion and love and its blessings, stories of prayers offered and wonders wrought—miracles duly recorded, investigated and given credence by church authorities, all received through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, revered in so many of her images, invoked under her different names (cf. Zafe, 105-17).

Zafe's work arrives at these conclusions, here given in brief: "The early missionaries who came to the Philippines from Spain from the very beginning found that the devotion to the Blessed Mother was so readily received by the natives, that they increasingly made it a significant part of their evangelizing work." "They all promoted with great zeal the devotion to Mary, making the early Filipinos more conscious of its value and importance. They made it part and parcel of the religious life [of the people they evangelized]." "The devotion to Our Lady, which is deeply imbedded in the hearts of the Filipino people," thus remains "a lasting tribute to the zeal of the early missionaries in this particular point. In answer to the tender devotion which the
early missionaries and the Filipinos of old professed towards the Blessed Mother, [Mary] made them feel in a tangible way her maternal aid and protection. In the spiritual birth and growth to maturity of the Filipino people as a Christian community, Mary’s intervention was palpably felt. The history of the catholic missions in the islands bears eloquent testimony to this fact” (Zafe, 150-53).

“History points out the fact that Marian devotion has a special role in the rapid conversion of the Philippines to the Catholic faith. As a reward for the filial devotion manifested towards our Lady, she did not hesitate to intervene in an extraordinary way in some cases of conversion [to the faith]. Furthermore, devotion to Mary led to the intensification of Christian life. . . . [The] devotion to Mary, rightly understood and practiced, was a powerful means in helping the early Filipinos to live an intense Christian life. . . . Lastly, Marian devotion contributed to the preservation of the Faith of the Filipino people, and this was seen, in a spectacular way, in the famous battle of La Naval.” Things would have been different in the religious sphere had it not been for the people’s devotion to the Blessed Mother. “In short, the Philippines would not be what it is now—the only Catholic nation in the Orient—were it not, as history testifies, [due] to the many interventions of Mary in answer to the tender and filial devotion which the Filipino people professed towards her” (Zafe, 153-54).

From the earliest years of Filipino Catholicism, chroniclers and historians tell us that each day was punctuated and colored by the natives’ devotion to Our Lady.

At daybreak, the town’s leaders and its students would gather at the church for the Angelus, for the rosary, and on given days, the Mass. In the afternoons, as the day was ending, once again, the Angelus and the rosary, with practically everyone among the townsfolk participating. Before the families repaired to their homes for the night, before the church doors shut for the day, there would be devotions once again, ending (as the canonical hours do) with hymns to the Mother of God, the Salve Regina above all.

Each week, on Saturday morning when Masses in honor of Mary
were sung, members of Marian organizations would join in. They would receive communion on feast days of Our Lady, and later make devout processions held in her honor.

Visitors from Europe wrote wonderingly about going through the city of Manila, and through many other towns in the evenings, and hearing the rosary recited in every house they passed. On barges and in boats bringing people from place to place, travelers would sing hymns to Our Lady, and pray the Hail Mary’s of the rosary through much of the journey.

**FILIPINOS AND OUR LADY THROUGH THE AGES**

As Philippine Catholicism grew, more and more chapels, visitas and churches were dedicated to Our Lady, given her name, graced by her images and placed under her protection. Baptismal records give testimony to the numberless girls baptized and given her name. These and a thousand other facts testify to the extraordinary way Filipinos “took Our Lady and made her their own,” and the extraordinary hold Mary had on the Filipino people, a powerful bond of mutual affection which endures to this day.

Our Lady’s place in Filipino history is (one might say) a nearly “omnipresent” one. So many churches and chapels, so many shrines all over the country, are linked with stories of Our Lady’s intervention in the lives of individuals and communities. Many of these have been studied by careful researchers, many more form part of ongoing popular tradition and legend. But there are two events, both of large and decisive significance, which have a definite place in the history of the Filipino people.

The first is the battle of La Naval (1646) between a squadron of Dutch vessels set to take over the City of Manila and two Spanish galleons which fought to prevent this, and the “EDSA People Power Revolution” of February 1986. Both of these events, for Filipino Catholics, are cherished as Marian Events, marking Our Lady’s special intervention and protection of her beloved people.
La Naval and Our Lady of the Rosary

Horacio de la Costa, the eminent Filipino historian writes (De la Costa, 407):

In the course of one year, two superannuated galleons, the Encarnacion and the Rosario, ... won three [naval] battles, one after the other, against [the vastly superior Dutch forces], and at that time when only their molave hulls stood between Manila, half reduced to rubble by the earthquake of 1645, and almost certain capture. The lack of proportion between human means employed and the result convinced the Manilans that they owed the salvation of their city to the Mother of God, whom the galleons’ crew invoked so fervently under the title of Our Lady of the Rosary. This is why from that year to the present the feast of the Holy Rosary is celebrated with a procession that surpasses all others in splendor, and the statue of Our Lady carried in that procession is the most precious treasure of the Church of the Dominicans, and bears the proud name of La Naval.

“EDSA: the People Power Revolution”

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II, 21) introduces the EDSA events thus:

EDSA: Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, Quezon City, where in February 1986 hundreds of thousands of Filipinos rallied, prayed, shared food and encouragement with one another and eventually forced a change of government from a dictatorial to a democratic form. The phenomenon came to be known as “People Power.”

In his homily of 25 February 1987 Jaime Cardinal Sin noted that our Blessed Lady “was, undeniably, the most visible symbol, both of our supplication to God and God’s response to us in the EDSA events. She was the ever-present symbol of the grace given to us, ... of the hope and courage [graciously granted] through her intercession.”
At the various sites where tens of thousands of people converged to wage, for one hundred hours, the "revolution of peace and prayer, images of Our Lady were set up in almost every street corner. Rosaries were recited all day long, one after the other, almost without interruption, as people watched, or knelt in front of armored cars and tanks, or rushed toward descending helicopters and advancing troops."

Cardinal Sin continued: "So many of those who practically lived on the streets those days have told us, again and again, that never before had they experienced so deeply in their souls the presence of Our Lady beside them, the presence of the Lord in them and around them, and in each other too…. All through the Marian Year of 1985 we had renewed again and again our desire and resolve to be a people bound by love to Our blessed Lady, pueblo amante de María. And throughout the EDSA revolution the desire and resolve was, we believe, blessed from Heaven. 'Our Lady was with us!' How often I have heard that from so many of you—your words often joined with tears of wonder and joy…. Truly Our Lady was with us, and this we will remember, all our lives long."

These words of one of the main protagonists in that series of events "which was EDSA" tells us, powerfully and movingly, how Filipino Catholics who were at EDSA think of EDSA's deepest meaning and of Our Lady at its heart.

During the years of the ruinous Marcos dictatorship, various political groups tried through ideological formation-seminars and teachings to unite the Filipino people so that they might, in unity, topple the tyranny of the "national security state." All this labor seemed availing. It was by prayer and penance, and by our Lady, "under Mary's banners," that unity was finally forged, and our people finally won their freedom through the ways of peace, without bloodshed. "At EDSA, it was Mary, that made our people one." This was a theme repeated often, as people later reflected on the EDSA events.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991, the most important synodal event of the post-Vatican II period in our country, has said (PCP-II, 153):
...the church of the Philippines, as *pueblo amante de María*, "a people in love with Mary," will always continue to seek her intercession and learn from her way of life what we need to be as a community of disciples. She is truly what her oldest image in the Philippines call her: *Nuestra Señora de Guia*, Our Lady who guides our way.\(^2\)

**MARY AND RECENT EVENTS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

A presentation on Our Lady in Philippine history and piety would be incomplete if it did not include mention of the role of Mary in "EDSA Dos," the second "people power" event in January of 2001. Mary’s "participation" in the events of that turning-point in recent Philippine history can be viewed through the optic of Cardinal Sin's own person and his Marian devotion as well as through the pivotal role he has played in Philippine life during the last quarter of the twentieth century (NAGA, 5-6):

...one trait there is that marks Jaime Sin's person perhaps more clearly than anything else: his passionate filial love for Mary. She has been, from the earliest years, in an extraordinary way, mother of this man of God. Of so many things that might be said of this side of the Cardinal's character, we might single out two stories. Both center around the image of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal which is venerated in the chapel of the Jaro major seminary where Jaime Sin spent the last years of his studies for the priesthood.

When chronic serious bouts with asthma threatened his ordination to major orders and the priesthood, the seminarian in frail health wrote a letter to Our Lady, begging her to ask her Son for his healing. With youthful fervor he signed the letter with his own blood and placed it under the Marian image in the chapel. As he himself recounts it, Our Lady's answer came quickly. The Lord cured him once and for all of his asthma, and he went forward to become a priest. This
was in early 1954; the first miraculous gift of Our Lady's intercession.

In January 2001, as His Eminence himself tells it, when Joseph Estrada was afflicting our nation's life with the corruption and scandals of his feckless presidency—"much more serious than asthmatic attacks," he says,—Cardinal Sin began—with the strong and untr taxing help of former President Corazon Aquino—a crusade of prayer (the rosary of our Lady!) and the fulfillment of the Fatima First Saturdays, to resolve the political and economic crisis besieging our country. Some devout ladies of the community of the EDSA Shrine brought to the Archbishop's house the replica of the Jaro Marian image (venerated at the EDSA church). As the situation worsened, the Cardinal once again wrote a letter to Our Lady, begging her to intervene and gain the deliverance of our nation—if need be, by miracle. He even suggested a time-frame to her: by the end of the third week of January. To his surprise after he had signed the letter and put it under the statue, his heart was filled with new hope, even with certainty. He began telling those he spoke with, that everything would be over before the last Sunday of the month. Those who heard him, took it as a pious but unrealistic wish. But when on Tuesday January 23, the "craven eleven" Senators voted to keep that "second envelope" sealed, the rage of tens of thousands exploded in the streets, at EDSA and Ortigas in Quezon City first, then later in the cities and towns all over the land. Miraculously, it seemed, as young people in many thousands closed in upon Mendiola, by Saturday's early afternoon, the end of the third week of January, eve of the Feast of the Santo Niño, a new president was sworn in under Our Lady of EDSA's eyes, and "it was all over but the shouting."

From these two stories one can fill in the rest: the Cardinal's devotion to Our Lady and her rosary, his boundless filial trust and love for her which, in a true sense, defines the person, the prayer and the priesthood of Jaime Sin.
CONCLUSION

_Pueblo amante de Maria_ is more than a poetic attribute predicated of Filipinos, Catholics specially, but—surprisingly, for non-Filipinos—of a good number of non-Catholics also. A special love for Our Lady strongly marks Filipino life and history. In the Filipino experience, this love must have been reciprocated in truth; otherwise, how could it have so long, not only survived but grown in breadth and depth? In crucial moments of personal lives, but also in the life of a whole people, why does it rise up to the heights of renewed intensity? These questions are posited as leading to the affirmation of a more-than-ordinary inter-relationship, in the realm of faith and love, between Mary and the Filipino people.

In Mexico City’s old Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I remember reading the words, _Non fecit taliter omni nationi_, “He has not done these things to every people.” Perhaps the statement may be appropriately applied to the Filipino people too. As already noted, Pope John Paul II spoke of a special bond between Mary and our land and our people when he welcomed the then President Corazon C. Aquino to the Vatican. He urged her to remind her people of it, so that in future years it might endure. This is a wish and prayer we make ours also.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 In 1975, the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of the Philippines issued a pastoral letter, *Ang Mahal na Birhen, Mary in the Philippine Life Today*. This document retains its value today. The data gathered in Part I, “Facts Related to the Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Philippines,” needs updating, but represents a still-valid summary, and provides information on Marian invocations and titles, practices of devotion, Mary in the liturgical year in the Philippines (Advent and Christmas, Holy Week and Easter), and popular celebrations. A final section on veneration of Mary in other Christian Churches completes the brief survey.

2 PCP-II 554-555 concludes its description of Priestly Spirituality (532-555) with an insistence that since Filipino Christianity has a strong Marian characteristic, Our Blessed Lady “must have a special place in the hearts of [priests in our communities].” A priest who cherishes a special love for Our Blessed Mother will thus enter more readily into the mind and heart of Filipino Catholics and more readily resonate with their spirit, their faith and hope, their deepest lives. In addition, refer to Horacio de la Costa’s play, “Woman of the House,” (1954) in *Five Plays* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982), 75-148.