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**Philippine Province Seminar on
Local Forms of Prayer
10-11 June 1985**

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**Philippine Province Seminar on Local Forms of Prayer
10-11 June 1985**

VITALIANO R. GOROSPE, S.J.

This two-day seminar was a follow-up of the Pastoral Seminar on Asian Forms of Prayer held at the EAPI on 25 February to 1 March 1984. The objective of the Philippine Province Seminar was to explore and identify *Filipino* forms of prayer. How do Filipinos pray? The five papers presented and the discussion after each paper were attempts to answer this question.

THE PAPERS

Fr. Vicente Marasigan's paper on "Dreams" was based on the author's experience of the dream of whispering spirits of Mt. Banahaw (*Panorama*, 7 April 1985) and on the importance of dream symbols in the communal discernment of God's will by the religious community of *Samahan ng Tatlong Persona Solo Dios* in Mt. Banahaw. The author offered a tentative explanation of trancelike behavior in Filipino popular religiosity as the cultural dramatization of dream symbols. That the symbols lead to the building up of community is one sign that they are from God. The discussion which followed revolved around several approaches—psychological, anthropological, theological, experiential—to the meaning of dreams to discover whether dream symbols can be forms of prayer. Psychologically, dreams are the royal road to the unconscious and can reveal the hidden self and its powers. Anthropologically, dreams are culturally constituted and can also be the products of the individual's unique experience. Theologically, dreams can be the vehicles of divine revelation or the divine communication of life. Of course, dreams can be interpreted differently by a reli-

gious person or an atheist. A hypothetical conclusion is that dream symbols can be vehicles of self revelation or divine communication and can be forms of prayer, forms of discernment of God's will, or aids to prayer. The problem is one of *discernment*— what the criteria are for discerning which dream meditations are authentic forms of prayer, that is, from God and directed to God.

The socio-anthropological study of the variety of prayer forms in the Mt. Banahaw context by Prof. Prospero Covar focused on the *pamumuwesto* or ritualized pilgrimage, made individually or collectively under a prayer guide, serially or in a two-year cycle, through the complex of mountain prayer—stations consisting of rocks, rivers, caves, and peaks from the foot to the top of Mt. Banahaw. This distinctive prayer form observed by the religious community of the *Ciudad Mystica de Dios* is based on the belief that the Holy Land (Santong Lugar) has been transferred from Palestine to Mt. Banahaw and that after the Last Judgment, the City of God will be established where the chosen people will dwell in bliss under the “motherly care” of Almighty God. In the meantime the devotee is enjoined to remain faithful to the end to merit eternal life. It is in this eschatological context that this Filipino form of prayer practised in Mt. Banahaw becomes meaningful.

In the discussion the following points came up. First, the Mt. Banahaw religious communities and their ritualized prayer forms are nationalistic in character. Secondly, further study can center on the evolution of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the feminine aspect of God in the *Ciudad Mystica de Dios* doctrine and in the ritual of the *suplina* (whiplash), its motivation and dynamics, and the possible influence of Christian and Franciscan discipline on the *suplina*. Although Prof. Covar's paper was limited to the anthropological explanation of the cultural phenomenon of *pamumuwesto*, he noted that this Filipino ritualized form of prayer manifests such characteristics of Asian prayer as the unique master-discipline relationship, the ritual of silence, fasting, chanting, bodily movements, personalized prayer, and the sense of cosmic study.

Fr. Francisco Demetrio's paper studied the prayer invocations in two Bukidnon epics (*Lam-ang* and *agyu*) and the prayers to the Rooster and the *Idao* Bird in the Ifugao epics. The selected invocations show that the early Manobos believed in Almighty God and in a hierarchy of lesser gods as well as in the dead's journey in

the ship of death to the tree of life—elements which are shamanistic in origin. In the prayer to Almighty God there is also reference to a mother god whose identity is not clear. The prayer to the rooster and to the bird show that birds are divinatory for the Ifugao. The prayers in Philippine epics also show a strong belief in spirits, guardians or enemies.

The main points that emerged from the discussion were: first, that Philippine epics show a cosmic religious and cosmic symbols are signs of the divine. Some Philippine epics existed as ancient oral traditions; others show Christian influence. These epic prayers are still chanted at specified times. Secondly, the explanation of epic prayers as “shamanistic” in origin was questioned. It was suggested that these epic prayers were inspired by spirit possession which is distinctive of Filipino forms of prayer. With regard to the *Pasyon* (Lenten chanting of the Passion of Christ), one can argue that the early Spanish missionaries substituted the *Pasyon* for the epic prayers when they could have preserved the latter for evangelization. Or one can say that the *Pasyon* was the new form given by the missionaries to the epic prayers in Philippine epics.

According to Fr. Jaime Bulatao, Filipino faith healing is a popular Filipino form of prayer. After describing the three models of Philippine faith healing—the charismatic, the animist, and the Lourdes models—the author gave both a psychological and a theological explanation of faith healing. From a psychological viewpoint, the subconscious is mobilized to do the healing. It is the fiducial faith of the subject to be cured, not the healer, that mobilizes the subconscious to come up with a cure. From the gospels, it is clear that healing was part of Christ’s ministry and that it required faith on the part of those to be healed.

In the discussion after Fr. Bulatao’s paper, many points were clarified with regard to faith healing and other phenomena that defy rational or scientific explanation, e.g. firewalkers, clairvoyance. Faith healing usually requires the instrumentality of another person. There must be deep communication between the healer and the subconscious part of the subject. The power to heal by means of hypnosis or altered state of consciousness is found in the subject, not in the healer who is but an instrument. Healing is usually done through the instrumentality of material things, e.g. a Mt. Banahaw twig, even spectacles. From a theological point of view, faith is necessary for healing; faith in itself is curative and is

a sign of the Kingdom of God. Faith in God and faith in man must not be dichotomized. Whether fiducial faith is curative without moral integrity on the part of the healer was a question left unanswered.

Fr. Ruben Villôte's paper reported on a survey made of 238 Catholic families from two poor parishes (squatters) in Metro Manila. In the questionnaire the poor were asked: (1) what form of prayer they considered important; (2) why they prayed; (3) how they knew that God answered their prayers; and (4) what devotion led them to extraordinary closeness to God. Four forms of devotion dominate the prayer life of the 476 respondents: (1) *panata* (fulfilling a vow); (2) *sanib* (spirit possession); *ayuno* (fasting); and (4) *paramdam* (feeling the presence of the dead). These prayers and devotions were considered "superstitious," "uncanonical," "dangerous" by some ecclesiastical reactors. With regard to the environment which has helped him most in his prayer life as a priest, Fr. Villote would rank solitude as the first; folk devotions as the second; pastoral and liturgical celebrations as the third; and clerical recollections as the last. Fr. Villote singled out five characteristics of Filipino prayer based on the Filipino psyche. The prayer of the Filipino poor are concerned with one's family, suffering, the overcoming or acceptance of suffering, spirits, vows or promises. Furthermore, Filipino prayer is emotional, ritualistic, and may lead to mystical or trancelike prayer.

The following questions and points came up in the discussion of Fr. Villote's paper. First, the problem of obedience to the official or hierarchical church with regard to folk devotions and prayers can be resolved if we obey the symbolic reality behind the particular hierarchical official and keep in mind the overall goal of the Church and its hierarchy. Secondly, many questions dealt with the indigenization of the liturgy and theology. The trancelike behavior that is the effect of popular folk devotions and prayers should be seriously taken into account in the process of indigenization. We must ask whom we are addressing in our official liturgy—the educated or folk consciousness; otherwise the Roman liturgy will remain alien to our people. One principle of inculturation is: presume the cultural element to be positive unless proven otherwise. For example, the positive meaning of the *bahala na* attitude is not lack of responsibility or fatalistic resignation but rather the Filipino sense of buoyancy, sense of risk, and practical equanimity.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The concluding discussion took an overall review of the five papers and came up with the following conclusions. First, we must relate Filipino popular religiosity to poverty and social justice issues, e.g. to Filipino migrant workers, women and child prostitution, the role of the Filipina, etc. Prayer in the Mt. Banahaw context, from an anthropological perspective, suggests that religion is a collective effort to establish a less alien kind of life and a better world, but the Mt. Banahaw local form of prayer is in danger of being commercialized by tourism. Secondly, in rediscovering Filipino forms of prayer our goal and task is not to impose but to propose and make available these local forms of prayer before introducing other Asian forms. We should explore the basic attitudes underlying these local forms of prayer such as receptivity, relatedness to God and fellowmen, creativity. Catholics should be made aware of other local forms of prayer and their limitations and the official Church should appreciate non-Roman but valid forms of prayer. Thirdly, on the relation between the Christian faith and Filipino culture, the Christian faith or the experience of Jesus Christ can purify the culture, because not everything in any culture is true or good. Fourthly, on the relation of Christianity to other Asian religions, theologians no longer claim that Christianity is necessarily and always better than other Asian religions, which are also ways of salvation. One theological explanation is that God sent the Holy Spirit to every created soul before the Incarnation. Christianity, if it is to be accepted by Asians, has to be baptized in the waters of other Asian religions which means inculturation. Fifthly, Zen prayer does not withdraw its practitioners from social involvement. On the contrary, the sense of cosmic unity in Zen leads to solidarity with one's fellowmen and Zen is concerned with the social transformation of society.

There was no deliberate effort to arrive at a consensus statement. But the participants briefly expressed their reaction to the Seminar and made some concluding comments on the variety of local forms of prayer. Fr. Demetrio: What is of value is the new awareness and acceptance of a pluralism of prayer forms, not only local but also Indian, Buddhist, Zen, and the basis of this common acceptance is our common humanity. Ms. Colette Condon: There is a rich variety of approaches to God and there is something for

everyone. Sr. Mary Jane Pineda: There is unity amidst diversity and hence we should be open to all methods and expressions of prayer and worship. Prof. Jose de Mesa summarized: "From the viewpoint of a theologian, the seminar was a concrete effort to show how theology should proceed: first, by listening and coming in contact with God, and secondly, by becoming aware, not of a distant God but a God who is always right here with us ("karamay natin ang Diyos") and who makes Filipino culture and prayer forms his home. Theology here in the Philippines was for a long time European but now it is home at last."