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## Rituals in Manila's "Catacombs"

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## Notes and Comments

### Rituals in Manila's "Catacombs"

VICENTE MARASIGAN, S.J.

The metaphor of the "catacombs" refers to prayer groups of people who keep a low profile, avoid publicity, stay in hiding as it were, because the religious rituals that they practice are "despised."<sup>1</sup> Most of these people are "simple and poor."<sup>2</sup> They are too poor to afford the kind of education being given at the expensive Catholic schools of Manila. They are too simple to distinguish between false and true beliefs as formulated in the cultural categories of western theology.

According to Evangelii Nuntiandi, many such despised practices are now "being rediscovered."<sup>3</sup>

#### SOME POPULAR FORMS OF PIETY

To share in this rediscovery, a group of students went down into some of the catacombs, in and around Metro Manila, and observed or took part in about 44 rituals. Of these, 12 are found

1. This low regard for native rituals is noticeable in the younger Filipino clergy and can easily be documented if necessary. A priest in Central Luzon would disdain any involvement with flagellants because "mga gago lang iyan." A seminary professor schooled in the tradition of Beethoven and Mozart would have nothing to do with the Pabasa because he finds it "revolting." At a recent gathering of diocesan priests, one participant objects to anything that smacks of "folk Catholicism" because he has always considered it un-Christian. The author himself sorrowfully confesses to having despised the rituals of his provinciano relatives several years ago, and remembers his considering it a status symbol to be considered in the same class as Americans and Europeans and therefore culturally superior to local natives. Although this attitude is slowly becoming less pronounced since the 1975 exhortation of Pope Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, at least it illustrates the propriety of the word "despised" in number 48 of this papal document.

2. Evangelii Nuntiandi, no. 48.

3. Ibid.

to be most frequently used and are numbered here in the order of their observed frequency: (1) Faith-healing: this usually consists of *hilot* with coconut oil or the application of herbs; sometimes there is a laying on of hands a few inches from the afflicted parts; (2) *Langkap* or *sanib* or *sapi*: these Tagalog words do not distinguish between the technical meanings of the English words "possession" and "inspiration," describing a person somehow influenced by the Sto. Niño, the Blessed Virgin, or some saint, and from his or her lips there flow words of exhortation, consolation or edification, — words which the hearers feel cannot be attributed merely to the normal intelligence of the person so influenced; (3) Spirit communication: the souls of deceased relatives are invoked; (4) *Manghuhula*: a person who is believed to be gifted with precognition and the ability to locate lost objects; (5) *Tawas*: molten wax, usually dyed red, is poured into a basin of water, floats on the surface where it hardens and forms certain patterns which are then interpreted; (6) Ritual dancing, e.g. the fertility dances in the church plaza in Obando or in some barrio processions, which lately have been widely exploited by the tourism industry into what it calls *ati-atihan*; (7) Death rituals: frequently consisting of a prayer session and a *salu-salo* on the ninth and fortieth day after death or burial, and especially the all-night vigil between 1 and 2 November in the cemetery; (8) *Anito*: a figurine of some venerated spirit, whether of God or of the Saints or of some ancestor or of some nature spirits; (9) *Anting-anting*: usually some medallion worn around the neck as a charm or a pendant; (10) Interpretation of dreams: this gift is believed to be bestowed on some highly intuitive persons; (11) Exorcism or deliverance: people who are afflicted with *kulam* (hex through sorcery or witchcraft) are cured of their affliction through this ritual, which has a great variety of forms depending on the character of the *kulam*; (12) Flagellation: on Good Friday, in imitation of Christ's scourging, *penitentes* whip themselves unto blood while walking in procession toward the barrio chapel.<sup>4</sup>

#### COMMON TRAITS OF POPULAR PRACTICES

The first step in our reflection is to take these 12 rituals in our preliminary sampling and to classify them according to common

4. For a more detailed description of flagellation, see Vicente Marasigan, "Grass-roots Ascetical Renewal," *Philippine Priests' Forum* 7 (March 1975): 92-95.

traits. Eight of these may, for convenience, be called "animistic,"<sup>5</sup> and the other four "corporeal."

#### ANIMISTIC RITUALS

These animistic practices in some way or another involve the activity of spirits. In Tagalog accounts, spirits are personal entities endowed with superhuman powers of intellect and will, and communicate their activity to mankind through specially gifted men and women. (These specially gifted men and women are called shamans by Eliade.<sup>6</sup> Before the arrival of European missionaries in the Philippines four centuries ago, our ancestors called them *tuntungan*, *daetan*, *katalonan*, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

In the language of modern transpersonal psychology, the special gifts that shamans have are now termed parapsychic.<sup>8</sup> One example is the ability to induce in themselves or in others an "altered state of consciousness,"<sup>9</sup> a state not unlike the ecstasies or trances associated with some of the Old Testament prophets.<sup>10</sup> Modern Tagalog shamans in Manila's catacombs are believed to have this gift, and the Tagalog term for this state is *langkap* or *sanib*.<sup>11</sup> This may be a state of vivid inspiration in a dramatic context. It is similar to the mood of artistic exaltation in a *balagtasan*, during which two poets carry on a friendly duel in a language that is rhymed and rhythmical, full of vivid imagery, and amazingly spontaneous. This similarity strongly suggests the hypothesis that *langkap* may be a natural gift, not superhuman, not miraculous.

5. The label "animistic" is here used not in its usual pejorative sense but in the sense of a belief professed by most religions, whether Christian or non-Christian, namely, belief in spirits. An angry but accurate analysis of the usages of this word is given by E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 128-34.

6. M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), p. 3.

7. Other names of Filipino shamans are listed by Fr. Francisco Demetrio, S.J. in his article "Philippine Shamanism and Southeast Asian Parallels" *Asian Studies* 11 (August 1973): 131.

8. E. Mitchell, ed., *Psychic Exploration* (New York: Putnam, 1974), pp. 571-614. A footnote on p. 582 has a startling reference to Third World shamans as "specialists in nonordinary realities" on whom psychologist Dr. J. Houston is basing hopes of liberating the world from the scientific-industrial paradigm and hence from destruction.

9. L. N. Mercado, *Filipino Religious Psychology* (Tacloban: Divine Word Publications, 1977), keynote speech of Bulatao, pp. x-xxi.

10. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), pp. 4-6.

11. V. Marasigan, "Tagalog Ecstasies," *Philippine Priests' Forum* 10 (March 1978): 22-32.

But this must be understood in the theological context of grace that builds on nature — God can make use of the natural gifts of Tagalogs for supernatural ends. Tagalog cultural forms can be a vehicle for promoting catechesis, charismatic renewal, and other pastoral aims, provided we can discover (or rediscover) their true function as culturally accepted forms of communication and give them a proper orientation and catechetical content.

Another example of a shamanic gift is interpretation of dreams. Again, modern transpersonal psychology is now hypothesizing that dreams are a valuable source of information about the contents of our unconscious.<sup>12</sup> On this basis, psychiatrists have been successful in healing many sicknesses of the mind, and by removing mental impediments, reactivating the self-healing powers of the body.

This brings us to a third example of a special gift: faith-healing. The rituals of authentic faith-healing are always in a religious context. They are usually nonverbal, but sometimes they are also verbalized in garbled Latin,<sup>13</sup> more for dramatic effect than for intelligent communication. The main intention is to evoke in the patient and in the community a religious act of faith. The underlying principle is that among all human motivations, religious motivation is the most efficacious for inducing a fervent desire for spiritual and physical wholeness, and that this fervor is intensified by the moral support of a praying community. Sometimes this fervor is mistaken for fanaticism or superstition. This mistake is understandable in those who worship “science” and who are logically led to the “scientific” position that all religion is superstition. In Tagalog culture, this worship of “science” is foreign, and religious fervor, e.g., in faith-healing, is indigenous and conatural.

The other examples of animistic rituals can be considered in a similar way, namely: demythologize the popular Tagalog accounts of these practices; express the residue in the categories of western science; discover the categories of western theology or biblical theology that seem most appropriate.

12. See for example C. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Collins, 1963) p. 273 and passim.

13. Francisco Demetrio, *Myths and Symbols Philippines* (Quezon City: National Book Store, 1978), pp. 220-27.

For example, when a shaman is described as contacting a deceased relative of a client or as predicting his future, this description may mean that the shaman, through extrasensory perception, intuitively understands the unexpressed concern for the deceased relative, or the unexpressed hopes for the future, and on the basis of this intuition, conducts a psychodrama in a mood of ecstasy shared with the client, to motivate him into taking steps to make his unexpressed dreams come true, into believing that there are no impossible dreams. The most appropriate biblical reference for this is the "faith that moves mountains."

As for *tawas*, this is as puzzling as the Rorschach ink-blots used by psychiatrists as a tool for diagnosis. But they sometimes work. Perhaps our Tagalog shamans already knew about this long before Rorschach was born. Medical doctors now recognize the value of intuitive serendipity in the diagnosis of hidden things. Perhaps these are the natural underpinnings of the Pauline charisms of "reading hearts" (I Cor. 14/24-25) or the knowledge of "hidden things" (I Cor. 2/7ff., I Cor. 4/5).

So much for animistic rituals.

#### CORPOREAL RITUALS

We come now to rituals that we classify as "corporeal" as contrasted with "animistic." While retaining animistic elements, these corporeal rituals emphasize bodily motions (as in ritual dancing and flagellation) and material symbols (like the *anito* and the *anting-anting*).

In the use of corporeal rituals, Tagalog culture, like many Southeast Asian cultures, differs from those of religious groups in mainland Asia that prefer yoga immobility to bodily motions. It also differs from the cultures of North American and North European Protestants who prefer oral language to body language, and who scorn the use of statues, medals, and scapulars in their religious exercises. Moreover people of these latter groups feel that because of the element of magic associated with corporeal rituals, these practices are tainted with superstition and therefore not authentically religious. This may be the place to bring in the need to establish practical norms for distinguishing between magic and religion.

For this purpose, Manuel Marzal proposes a tool of empirical

analysis.<sup>14</sup> He adopts insights from leading social scientists like Malinowsky, Frazer, Aberle, and Durkheim, and constructs four dimensions constituting the spectrum of which "magic" is at one end and "religion" is at the other end. The four dimensions are manipulative-supplicative, utilitarian-celebratory, amoral-moral, and individualistic-communitarian. It is based on the conviction that magic and religion, although conceptually distinct, are frequently mixed together in varying proportions in different cultures and different persons. In principle these proportions can be quantified at least approximately. Examples may be cited.

In the case of ritual dancing, one may go to Obando and ask some dancing couple why they are dancing. They may answer that they want to have children and they want to express their petitions to God in body language, and thus become worthy of His mercy and beget children. Thus the ritual is more "supplicative" than "manipulative." Flagellants sometimes say that they make this *panata* as a sign of gratitude for God's mercy, and they celebrate this in body language, more "celebratory" than "utilitarian." Of course there are also negative examples that may suggest the predominance of a magical mentality and thus the inauthenticity of the ritual among some people. The point is that authenticity or inauthenticity depends not on the ritual but on the person. Like the sacramentals of the Church, these rituals can be means of grace, not *ex opere operato*, but *ex opere operantis*.

Similar reflections are applicable to the anito and the anting-anting. Like the English equivalent "idol" derived from the Greek word meaning "shape," anito primarily means "statue," and only secondarily was it made to mean "statue of a false god." If we say that Catholic churches display anitos of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints, and that in the town plaza there is an anito of Jose Rizal, we would be perfectly correct, linguistically. Similarly, anting-anting is derived from a Malayan word which means a hanging weight (e.g., for balancing a sailboat), a pendulum, or a pendant worn around the neck. It is also linguistically correct to say that Catholics wear the anting-anting of the Sto. Niño. And again their authenticity depends not on the material object but on the person *ex opere operantis*. For example, a man wears a bronze medallion containing symbols representing for him the

14. Equipo Seladoc, *Religiosidad Popular* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1976), p. 130.

names of God in cryptic form; if his intention is *panglalake* (e.g., winning bolo duels or being irresistible to women), he lacks religious authenticity; if his intention is to make himself ever conscious of God's presence and goodness, and of his resolve to remain ever obedient to God's commandments, his religious practice is authentic.<sup>15</sup> The use of *anito* and *anting-anting* must not be interpreted as professing a theological doctrine but as a preference for a cultural style of expressing spiritual realities through material symbols. Western psychology and universal common sense uphold the efficacy of material symbols for inducing desired states of consciousness. Western theology uses this efficacy in its account of Christian sacraments and sacramentals.

#### INDIGENOUS SACRAMENTALS?

The moment has come to recommend pastoral decisions. In a nutshell, it is proposed here that we transform popular rituals into indigenous sacramentals. The Vatican II decree on the liturgy "Sacrosanctum Concilium," in article 79, says: New sacramentals may be added as the need for these "becomes apparent," and instructs that "qualified lay persons" be empowered by the ordinary to administer some sacramentals. Moreover, canon 1149 allows sacramentals, under certain restrictions, to be administered also to non-Catholics.

The theology on which these rulings are based is that cultural pluralism introduces important changes in religious symbolism, changes that are perfectly compatible with the theological relation between nature and grace.<sup>16</sup> There are symbols and symbols. Some symbols were instituted by Christ once and for all, and these we call sacraments. Other symbols, the sacramentals, are left to the discretionary institution of the living magisterium. The right of approbation is reserved to the Holy See, but it supposes initiative in the local churches.<sup>17</sup>

"New sacramentals may be added as the need for these becomes apparent." Is this need becoming apparent? Pastorally, on the basis of limited experience with communities of people who are

15. See Idowu in his treatment of "fetishism," pp. 125-28 of the book cited in footnote 5.

16. Article on "Sacramentals" in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, (Herder, 1970), vol. 5, p. 377, sec. 3 b (ii).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 375 sec. 1 b.



simple and poor and who are culturally unwesternized, this author feels that this need is becoming apparent.

Theologically, there is an even greater need for this transformation into sacramentals: there is need to add the causality *ex opere operantis Ecclesiae* to the good will of the people, and thus guarantee that ecclesial intercession will infallibly be present<sup>18</sup> to people who are simple and poor.

This proposal is in the same direction that Pope St. Gregory was following when he said: "Do not destroy the pagan temples, but instead, sprinkle them with holy water, set up altars in them, and place relics there . . . In permitting the converted these external pleasures, the joys of souls will be easily acquired." This statement may be contextualized by rephrasing it thus: "Do not destroy these indigenous rituals, but instead, transform them into sacramentals . . . In this way, our pastoral objectives will more effectively be attained."

18. *Ibid.*, p. 377, sec. 3b (iii).