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## Gaspar Aquino de Belen's Poetic Universe: A Key to his Metaphorical Theology

RENE B. JAVELLANA, S. J.

Between 1593, when the *Doctrina Cristiana*, one of the first Philippine printed books appeared, and 1703, only two major works written by native Filipinos were published by the presses owned by the missionary orders. While there were other books published during this early century of evangelization, they were penned by the friars and religious themselves who had not only mastered Latin and their native Castilian but the languages of the Philippines as well.

The first work, written by Tomas Pinpin, published in 1610 and republished in 1752 as an appendix to Blancas de San Jose's *Arte de la lengua tagala*, is a short manual written for Tagalogs who wanted to acquire a smattering of Spanish. It would be what we would call today, a phrase book, that is a quick way of appearing to know a foreign language without delving into its complex grammatical structure. *Librong Pagaaralan nang manga Tagalog nang uicang Castila* utilizes mnemonic devices to aid the studious Tagalog lest he be at a loss for words, should the Spaniard suddenly intrude into his peaceable kingdom.

The second book, written by Gaspar Aquino de Belen, a principal of Rosario, Batangas, and first published in 1703 is a bipartite work. The first part is a translation from the Spanish of prayers for the dying, the second and the more original work, a narrative and didactic verse about the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. Vicente L. Rafael describes Gaspar Aquino de Belen as "one of the most important yet least-studied figures of Tagalog literature."<sup>1</sup> Wherein lies the importance of this figure? Surely his verse poem is a masterpiece

1. Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), p. 194.

of literature, as it is the first important Christological statement from a Filipino.

The "least-studied" refers to the pioneering work in historico-criticism of Bienvenido L. Lumbera, and the essays of Nicanor Tiongson and Jose Mario C. Francisco.<sup>2</sup> But to Lumbera should go the credit for making Aquino de Belen known to contemporary readers. Aquino de Belen, who though mentioned in previous histories of literature, had been misidentified as a priest. But for a writer of his stature and, shall we say, a folk-theologian of his perspicacity, what has been written about Aquino de Belen is meager indeed.<sup>3</sup>

### THE FORGOTTEN LITERARY GENIUS

If Gaspar Aquino de Belen is of such stature why has his name and work lapsed into oblivion? There are a number of reasons. First, his text is inaccessible. To my knowledge there are only three copies of his *Manga panalanging pagtatagobilin sa caloloua nang tauong naghihi-ngalo*. One is kept in the Philippine National Library, another in the Lopez Memorial Museum Library, and a third in the British Museum. His sudden demise may have been occasioned by the confiscation of more than 700 copies of the 1760 edition of his work when the Jesuit's *Imprenta de la Compania* was sequestered by the Spanish crown in 1768. Second, the very popularity of this text was its death knell. The first part of his book, a set of prayers for the dying found itself in a number of prayer books and compendia of devotion, and the second part of the text, a poetic narrative on the passion, has been subsumed by the *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal*, the *pasyon* text chanted during Holy Week.<sup>4</sup> The *Casaysayan's* Passion narrative is drawn bodily, almost, from Aquino de Belen, so that Lumbera describes the *Casaysayan* as

2. Bienvenido L. Lumbera, *Tagalog Poetry 1570-1898, Tradition and Influences in its Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1986), pp. 57-66. Nicanor Tiongson, "The Pasyon: The Best-known Filipino Book," *Archipelago* 3 (1976): 31-32. Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Ang Pasyon ni Gaspar Aquino de Belen," *Sagisag* 1 (June 1975): 16-19.

3. I am not using "folk" in a derogatory sense. On the contrary, I use it as an antonym to self-conscious and sophisticated, qualities found in nineteenth century Tagalog poets who felt it vital that they prove their worth as poets, equal to the demands of arrogant Spanish critics, who looked down on the "indio" as nothing more than an overgrown child. All references in this article are to the 1760 edition. AqdB stands for the poem, and the stanza numbers are those I have prepared for the critical edition of the Ateneo de Manila University Press. The 1760 edition does not have stanza numbers, nor does it number every page of the text.

4. Rene B. Javellana, ed., *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), pp. 21-23, 30-33.

nothing more than "plagiarism."<sup>5</sup> There seems to have been no use for a book whose contents could be found in other works.

But more significant than these historical concomitants is the language of the text itself, especially the *pasyon*'s for it, too, is inaccessible. It was already inaccessible by the early nineteenth century so that Fr. Mariano Pilapil, the ecclesiastical censor (1814), saw fit to change *mudades palabras*.<sup>6</sup> An example of such "muted words" might be the term "patauac," a very specific and precise term, meaning "to be cured from snake bite." The context in Aquino de Belen is an *Aral* on the crucifixion. Here the author urges the pious reader to look up to Jesus and be healed from sin just as the Israelites looked at the bronze effigy of a snake that Moses had erected and were cured (AqdB 884–87).<sup>7</sup> In the *Casaysayan* the context is the same, but here the lines in Aquino de Belen, "pagamot cayo,t, patauac,/ sa cay Christong manlolonas," (AqdB 886) become "tayo,i, pagamot magcusa/ cay Jesus Haring daquila" (Cas 2013). The specific term "tauac" is omitted for the more general "pagamot."

#### THE POETICS OF GASPAR AQUINO DE BELEN'S PASYON

But the text is not totally inaccessible. Even the contemporary reader can make sense of much of the more difficult *pasyon* and be struck by its very concrete language. But only assiduous philological study of some 230 obscure words can intensify the experience to its fullest.

Concreteness of language remains an enduring quality of folk-poetry. The Biblical Psalms are a fine example of this. Never at a loss for words, the Psalmist describes one's sense of loss as drowning, as being hemmed in by enemies, as being like a parched land or a piece of wax melting under the hot desert sun (Ps 40: 2; 22: 12–16). The Mangyans of Southern Mindoro express the enduring bond of friendship, not in the existentialist language of absence and presence, but in an *ambahan* such as this:

Si aypod bay upadan  
No kang tinaginduman  
May ulang madi kagnan  
May takip madi kaywan

You, my friend, dearest of all,  
thinking of you makes me sad.  
Rivers deep are in between  
forest vast keep us apart.

5. Lumbera, *Tagalog Poetry*, p. 93.

6. Censorship notes of the *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal* (Manila: Imprenta de los Amigos del Pais, 1882).

7. Cf. Numbers 21: 4–9.

No kang tinaginduman  
Ga siyon di sa adngan  
Ga pagtandangayon diman

But thinking of you with love,  
as if you are here nearby  
standing, sitting at my side.<sup>8</sup>

Lumbera has pointed out that the concrete languaging of Aquino de Belen marks him as growing out of the tradition of eighteenth-century Tagalog folk poetry. But his mastery over the language (his choice of words is as astute as it is exact) marks him out as a literary figure above the ordinary.

Let us look at a few of his poetic lines.

At Gethsemani, Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples:

Ang manga Apostoles naman  
caniyang paaaragan,  
ipinapagsasanggalang,  
na houag tomalo,t, lomaban  
ang loob sa catimtiman.

(AqdB 92)

Quite simply the stanza says that Jesus prayed for his disciples so that they might not be vexed. But Aquino de Belen uses two metaphors to communicate this truth. The operative words are "paaaragan" and "ipagsasanggalang." "Arag" is synonymous to "alaga," that is to watch over and protect someone. It then is synonymous to "sanggalang." But the philologists, Frs. Juan de Noceda and Pedro de San Lucar, say that "arag" also refers to the supervisory task of a master carpenter or a "kapatas" of a construction.<sup>9</sup> Thus we may construe the first metaphor thus: Jesus prays that God the Father act like an overseer so that his disciples' unruly hearts not quarrel. The second metaphor is contained in the military term "sanggalang." Here the protection asked of the Divine father is similar to that of the military leader who defends a people from their enemies ("lomaban"). The double metaphor so skillfully woven together implies that the human heart can be vexed just as the laborers in the vineyard were vexed when their master paid them what they perceived to be an unjust wage (Mt 2: 1-16). The human heart can be vexed just as the Psalmist was vexed when he found himself hemmed in on all sides (Ps 22: 12-16).

Much of Aquino de Belen's concrete languaging revolves around simple descriptions. Christ's cross is described as "lapis na nagcaaapat,

8. Antoon Postma, *Treasure of a Minority* (Manila: Arnoldous Press, Inc., 1981), p. 112.

9. See Juan de Noceda and Pedro San Lucar, *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala*, 3rd ed. (Manila: Ramirez y Giraudier, 1860). First published 1754, I base most of my word meanings on this erudite dictionary by two missionary-scholars who were contemporaries of Gaspar Aquino de Belen.

/ maycapat somasang ganap." "Lapis" refers to hewn timber, or lumber that has been shaped into thick quadrilateral planks. It must be distinguished from "troso" which is unhewn lumber, or "tabla" which means boards. The cross made of lapis was "nagcaapat," that is, it had four ("apat") members. But these members were "somasang ganap," that is, well joined at the center. We notice how the poet leads us step by step. First he describes the material of the cross accurately, then he leads us to see its workmanship.

Here is another example of concrete description. As Jesus is carrying his cross he is hemmed in on all sides by his tormentors.

Sa holi may nagtotolac  
sinosoal nang paglacad,  
sa taguilira,t, sa harap,  
ang gomi pinaglalamas,  
may naglalabnot nang balbas.  
(AqdB 668)

There are two obscure words in this stanza: "sinosoal" and "gomi." "Soal" means to be pushed or edged out by someone beside you. "Gomi" is a synonym for "balbas" or beard. "Gomi" is probably native Tagalog, while "balbas" is a corruption of the Spanish "barba."

That Jesus is hemmed in and tormented, Aquino de Belen describes in steps. First, he talks of those who are behind Jesus, "sa holi nagtotolac," then those on either side "sinosoal" and finally those in front "sa harap." Then he concentrates on their action, this time described as a two-step act. First, his enemies disarrange his beard (pinaglalamas) and finally pluck it (naglalabnot).

Aquino de Belen's descriptions, (to use an anachronism) may be described as cinematographic. We feel that we are watching the Passion unfold through the poet's eye. We see only as much as he sees, but he is such perceptive seer that we end up amazed because we see so much.

Consider the following "cinematographic" descriptions. We have a medium shot to extreme close-up. Describing how Jesus is being mocked, he writes:

Mahal na mucha,y, pininghan,  
na ang mata ay natacpan  
panyong marumi at maraual.  
(AqdB 221)

The soldiers cover Jesus' eyes "pininghan" (medium shot; focus on soldiers' actions) so that he can no longer see (close-up of Jesus' face

especially his eyes), because his eyes have been covered by a dirty kerchief "panyong marumi,t, maraual (extreme close-up of kerchief).

We have a long shot, medium shot, pan down, pan-up. With great difficulty, Jesus wends his way. His blood-drenched body and thirsting spirit seek relief and find it in the comforting presence of his mother. But this respite is not to last, for the soldiers hurry him on.

Dinalidali na naman  
nang Judiong tampalasan,  
nang paglacad, at paghacbang,  
sinasacong inaacdal,  
bago,y, lubhang nangangalay.  
(AqdB 756)

The first three stanzas describe the scene in general, just as an establishing long shot does in cinema, then we are made to focus our attention on details. Here the poet's eye leads us to notice Jesus' heel. His heel, we are told, is struck "sinacong" and instantaneously with a quick pan-up we see him pushed by soldiers using their burly shoulders ("inaacdal"). As a pathetic note we are told that his body was still weak from the heart-rending farewell with his beloved mother (cf. AqdB 755).

There is also cut to cut, flashback, flashforward. In the *pasyon's* third *Aral*, (AqdB 146-51) a reflection on the capture of Jesus, the poet leads the reader to compare his own state with that of Jesus. Beginning with a rhetorical triplet, to remember, consider, and reflect upon Jesus' and the sinner's condition, the poet leads the reader through a dyptich of contrasts. Here is Jesus the sinless one roughly treated by soldiers (AqdB 147-48). Here he is bearing the Christian's sins while there is the Christian scot-free and unmindful of the great benefits he receives (AqdB 150). So, the Christian must be thankful that he, the slave, is treated so royally (Aqdb 151). Aquino de Belen's sermonette is effective because he can shift from the past when Jesus suffered to the present when the mindless Christian lives. He can shift quickly from Christ's to the Christian's condition, in a manner reminiscent of quick cuts and cinematographic flashbacks.

Because of its terseness and compactness, Aquino de Belen's poetry strikes us as very modern. He achieves this dense effect by a skillful use of synonyms, by judicious repetition, and by skillful play with word roots, thus leaving the reader with the task of himself constructing and reconstructing the meaning of the poetic line.

The use of synonyms and judicious repetition is obvious. Here are some synonyms picked at random from the text: "binababa,t, pina-pangco" (AqdB 149); "maticlohod, masongabang" (AqdB 144), "ca-

soyo mo,t, casapangan" (AqdB 199), "casoyo mo,t, casamaya" (AqdB 200), "caniyang uica,t, saysay" (Aqdb 298), "cabulosang lansangan" (AqdB 302), and "naguisi,t, nagcahiualay" (AqdB 911). Though these pairs of words mean the same, often one can tell that they are a shade apart. Take "binaba,t pinangco." Both mean to carry. But "binaba" has the nuance of carrying uphill, while "pinangco" means to lift on one's shoulders. "Casoyo" means a person with whom one has an agreement. It could also mean lover, "casamaya," one who involves or intrudes herself/himself in another's affairs, or simply companion. "Cabulosan" is a wide pathway where the wind blows free. So is "lansangan" pathway, but put the two together and "cabulosan" becomes a descriptive term for "lansangan" and we get the picture of a wide deserted highway where nature has its sway. "Naguisi,t, nagcahiualay" both mean to be torn, but "naguisi" refers to the first tear that begins the parting of a piece of cloth. What the poet presents here is not a static description of the tearing of the Temple's veil, but a dynamic account of its rending (cf. Mt 27: 51).

Aquino de Belen's use of synonyms and his frequent repetition of terms and ideas are an important part of his poetic armory. By choosing words separated by a mere nuance of meaning, his craft may be compared to the icon maker's who models his figures by thin and repetitive applications of finely cross-hatched lines, gradated in shade from the deepest dark to the brightest highlight. Though his is not the art of sudden change from light to dark and dark to light but of finely modelled chiaroscuro, Aquino de Belen can jolt the reader to good effect. He does this by playing with the affixes and roots of Tagalog words. In one example, Jesus is explaining to the disciples the symbolic meaning of his act of humiliation, washing their feet.

Toloy naguica pa naman  
itong Dios na marangal  
gaua co,y, inyong tularan,  
magotos, at pagotosan,  
magpono, at pagponoan.  
(AqdB 40)

Though Aquino de Belen accentuates his words, we know that different regions in Luzon accentuate the same words differently and, sometimes, indifferently. Spanish lexicographers tried to standardize variant pronunciations by introducing into written Tagalog the distinctions between the "i" and "e" sounds and the "u" and "o" sounds and by adding accent marks. But the indifference to these sounds and to fixed accentuations continues to persist. In Quezon province, "buwan," moon is pronounced as "bowan," with the accent placed on



the first syllable, while northern Tagalog has a harder pronunciation of the o/u sound and accentuates the word on the last syllable. Bearing these facts in mind, we find in this stanza an occasion to play with the ambiguities of "pono." We can read the lines as:

magponó at pagponoán

with accents on the last syllable of "magpono" and "pagponoan." The line would mean fill and be filled. But if the accents were moved to the syllable "po," and "no"

magponó at pagponóan

the line would mean lead and be led.

There is a shock of recognition. Aquino de Belen has captured the essence of Jesus' teaching on leadership. The disciple is not to lord it over his/her peers but to stand among them as one who serves. Her/his service fills the needs of others while the disciple is filled to the brim by the act of service. True headship, "pono," has its counter-valent reality, servitude. The careful painter of images has shocked us into recognizing profound truths. But the truths do not yield themselves to facile disclosure. The reader must enter the word play of the master poet.

#### AQUINO DE BELEN'S METAPHORICAL THEOLOGY

In a previous work, I characterized Aquino de Belen's *pasyon* as "a spirituality of Christian dying." There I argued that because the text was intended for a wake, "the poet has only one point to drive home: to remain faithful to Christ until death."<sup>10</sup> But how was the poet to assure that some engagement with Christ would come about, or that his poem be a means for making such an engagement possible?

The poet labored between two poles of Spanish Catholicism's literary tradition. One pole that rested on the foundations of scholasticism presented the truths of faith in an orderly, lucid, systematic, and argumentative manner. The other pole that rested on Spanish mystical tradition engaged the reader in the grand romance of salvation through a language filled with images and metaphors. Though a clearly defined theology of salvation, patterned after St. Anselm's theology of ransom, undergirded Aquino de Belen's *pasyon*, one hardly gets a glimpse of it amidst the metaphors and similes with which the text is

10. Javellana, *Casaysayan*, p. 13.

full. Aquino de Belen opted for the metaphorical tradition because this was a language of engagement rather than detachment. It was also attuned to "matalinhagang Tagalog" (metaphorical Tagalog).

Metaphors can function only when the reader is engaged in the imaginative task of the writer. For metaphors do not espouse clear, unassailable concepts, but are evocative images that awaken thought and feeling-filled experiences. Aquino de Belen employs metaphor on three levels. The first, the most obvious, is a literary device that evokes images, thoughts, and appropriate sentiments. The second is the constitutive backbone of his characters. The third is the deeper structure of his poem.

#### METAPHORS AS LITERARY DEVICES

This is the most obvious use of metaphor and one that marks out Aquino de Belen's poetic genius. With the proper metaphor he can help his reader understand abstract theological realities by leading them from the known to the unknown. For the known, he starts with eighteenth-century realities. Take his analogies for sin. Sin for him is like a snakebite, that needs a proper cure. (AqdB 886). Unrepented sin is like a debt unpaid that accumulates interest (AqdB 116). What merchant in eighteenth-century Manila did not offer countless Masses and prayed endless novenas for the successful return of the galleon on which he risked his fortune! What worries he had till he could pay his debts for the lending houses and *obras pias* lent at an exorbitant 30 percent interest! The sinner is like one who sleeps (AqdB 113). He sees not what is around him because his eyes are closed and he is dead to reality. Worse still, the sinner is one who acts as if asleep (AqdB 113). But woe to him because he is like a tree dried up and without fruit! The sinner is one who stands trial, like the servant to whom the master entrusted a precious sum. That sum is identified as the servant's own body. When the appointed hour comes he will have to give a reckoning of how he has used the Divine gift (AqdB 587-88). Aquino de Belen ranges wide for metaphors. Nature, daily life in the eighteenth century, Scripture itself, are fields bristling with metaphors. And the poet is a perceptive seer. He has an eye for detail. When he speaks of the accumulated interest for sin, he uses the word "saga," which is the lead weight merchants use for measuring out gold and silver (AqdB 147). Quite obviously the interest is not easily paid.

Metaphors are also used to plumb the depths of human suffering. The Virgin, seeing her Son's unbearable pain, says of herself:

Masucal ang aquing loob,  
 ang dalamahati nonohos  
 lalo sa matoling agos,  
 para acong tinotosoc  
 nang caliz, at manga tonod.  
 (AqdB 686)

The stanza is chockful of metaphors. The first line is an idiomatic expression that means "I am dismayed." But behind the idiom is an image. One's interiority ("loob") is compared to a field overgrown with grass and weeds ("masucal"). This metaphor from nature is followed by yet another one. Sorrow is like a raging flood that sweeps away one's inner peace. Then in a metaphor drawn from religious iconography, the poet has the Virgin say that her heart is pierced through. The image is obviously that of the *Virgen Dolorosa* or *Angustia*. But notice the skillful rooting in everyday life. It is not daggers or stilletes that cause the Virgin pain but the Moro's "caliz" or kris and the Tagalog's "tonod" or arrow. Again there is the shock of recognition! The distance between the Virgin's pain and the pious Tagalog reader's life is bridged. Pain takes on a native face.

Aquino de Belen's most successful metaphor for pain may be found when he describes the crucifixion (AqdB 789–805). Elsewhere, I have argued that this scene is drawn from the work by the Spanish monk Juan de Padilla.<sup>11</sup> But Aquino de Belen plunges Padilla's description to a depth of horror untapped by the melodramatic Spanish poet. All the details of the Crucifixion are from Padilla. The cross is marked, holes are drilled where Jesus' hands and feet should be, he is laid on the cross, one hand is nailed to the cross, but when the other is stretched out it does not reach its proper hole, so burly soldiers stretch his arm until it corresponds to the hole they had ordained. But all throughout his decription, Aquino de Belen has stretched a single metaphor in which he compares the Crucifixion to carpentry. Here are words he uses which are drawn from the carpenter's trade: *pahalang* (transverse beam), *ibinabao* (to place something on top of another), *tinictican* (to mark using a pointed metal object), *pacong bakal* (iron nail), *icana* (to stick a tenon in a mortise), *maonay* (to stick together), *capalang* (to lack or exceed in measurement), *sinocat* (to measure), *bongmacam* (to make a bacam, which is a wooden peg used in furniture), and *pinacoan* (a place for nailing). By skillfully using the vocabulary of carpentry, the

11. Rene B. Javellana, "The Sources of Gaspar Aquino de Belen's Pasyon," *Philippine Studies* 32 (1984): 305–21.

poet compares Jesus' body to just another piece of lumber which the unmindful, lazy, and callous soldiers treat with great disrespect. "I am a worm and no man," says the Psalmist. But Aquino de Belen plunges Jesus lower down the ladder of being. He is not sentient animal but vegetable life. Jesus could say, "Worse than a worm am I, I am a piece of useless lumber." The man crucified and the cross are one, or made one by his tormentors. Though broken, he seems to fit this furniture which is the cross.

What eighteenth-century Filipino would not feel the horror of the scene? The craftsmen of Manila were noted worldwide for their fine workmanship. Their furniture, bonded together with wooden pegs of the finest exotic woods, were treasures. They were noted shipwrights who made the galleons in Cavite. These lumbering *mulawin* fortresses of the sea braved the perilous Pacific crossing and yearly brought life and merriment to Manila. Fine craftsmen were not lacking in Manila and their work was prized.

Aquino de Belen knew that he stood in a long line of metaphor makers, starting with the Biblical writers themselves and the Fathers of the Church who wove imaginative and metaphorical connections between Scripture texts. Thus, beginning with the image of pain like a torrent, Aquino de Belen says Jesus, on the way to Calvary, compares his own and his mother's pain to the altogether familiar typhoon and its companion flood ("tubig ay lubhang malaqui / nitong Passion mong marami" AqdB 693). Speaking to his mother, Jesus says:

Di mo pa sucat matan-ao  
bahag Hari,t, balangao  
pagtila nang sigua,t, olan  
ang yaong nabibighaan  
nang olap, nang casaquitan.  
(AqdB 694)

Because his Passion is not over, Jesus says that the mother will not see the rainbow (bahag Hari,t, balangao) nor the end of stormy winds and rain (sigua,t, olan) but rather he whose countenance is wrapped by clouds of pain ("nabibighaan/ nang olap, nang casaquitan").

But talk of floods brings to mind the quintessential flood of Scripture, those forty days and forty nights when heaven's floodgates were open and Noe alone and his companions in the ark were saved. Drawing from this story in Genesis, Aquino de Belen has Jesus exhorting Mary to return to where it is safe ("magsaoli ca na Ina" AqdB 691), just as the dove who left the ark to see if the waters of the earth had receded, returned home to the safety of Noe's life-saving craft (Gen 8: 8-9).

Longmabas cang calapati  
 sa Dauong бага ni Noe  
 pagbalic na,t, di pa cati.  
 (AqdB 693)

The metaphor is daring. Mary is the dove. The waters are the pain of the Passion.

The poet is working within the best traditions of Marian imagery, for Mary in the Mass formulary ("Surge, columba mea") is compared to a dove. Dove-like in her purity and devotion. "The waters have reached up to my neck" complains the Psalmist in his pain (Ps 69: 1). And the ark is the sign of safety, as the disciples were safe in the boat with Jesus (cf. Mk 4: 35-41.).

Aquino de Belen was no unlettered farm boy. He was well acquainted with the Biblical tradition, so that he could in great daring play with its images. We are accustomed to think of Judas as one who betrays his Master and sells him for thirty pieces of silver as the Scripture says. But the poet reverses this image. It is not thirty pieces that were the price of the Christ. Rather, Christ was the price for the thirty pieces Judas so loved.

Ano ang sala sa iyo?  
 saca mo ipinagdoro  
 ang salapi minahal mo  
 siya,y, ipinagbayad mo,t,  
 di cana hongmintay payo.  
 (AqdB 154)

The stanza is full of financial investment imagery. We can interpret "sala" as "sin" or "offense, i.e., "How did Jesus offend you?" Or we can take "sala" in a more general sense of "error" or "failure," i.e. Jesus is a bad investment. So Judas takes him and uses him to pay for money he loved, and this without asking for financial advice.

#### CHARACTERS AS METAPHORS THE PASSION AS METAPHOR

Aquino de Belen does not take great pains in developing the characters in his narrative. Almost all of them are static. Only three characters are dynamic: Longinus who is converted (AqdB 963-80), Peter who denies Jesus but repents (AqdB 237-81), and Jesus himself. At the Garden of Gethsemani, Jesus shows a striking ignorance about his future and the reason for his impending death. Now knowing why he must die vexes Jesus. It takes an angel sent by the Father to calm his spirit. Only when he hears that he must die for the sake of

humankind's salvation does he achieve peace (AqdB 94–112). But from here on till the end, Jesus does not lose his equanimity.

All these lead us to conclude that Aquino de Belen is not interested in presenting rounded characters, arresting as unique psychological studies. He is more interested in presenting types or models to follow. It is quite clear that Aquino de Belen treats Biblical material typologically. Thus, he speaks of Jesus as Isaac, and Mary must follow Abraham's example of loving surrender (AqdB 679). Jesus' death was predicted by the prophets. He came to fulfill all that they had said (AqdB 1–11).

Behind typological exegesis stands the belief in the unity of history and in the Providence that guides its unfolding. Thus medieval exegetes did not find it strange that Old Testament incidents and words spoke prophetically about Jesus and found their fulfillment in his actions and words.

Strictly speaking, when Aquino de Belen draws parallels between the Biblical characters and his readers, he is not engaged in Biblical typology for Biblical typology limited itself to finding connections between the Biblical New Testament type and the Old Testament antitype. Typology worked under stringent rules where the relationship of type and antitype had to be historically rooted, where the type proved to be the perfect form of the antitype, and where type and antitype had to have a referent in the Christ event and had to fall within the ambit of God's saving history.

But belief in the Providence that guided history made Aquino de Belen confident, as did the other religious authors of his age, that one could find a correspondence between the Biblical events and the Christian's daily life.

Thus, Mary is proposed for emulation. She is the ideal obedient and faithful servant. The good thief who repents at the last moment of his life is a guarantee that the Christian who turns to God when he finds himself at the brink of eternal perdition will be saved like the thief. Peter's fall and repentance is the model for all repentance. Longinus's conversion is a clarion call to the pagan to enter and live the Christ-story. Even Judas, in a negative way, serves as a model. His life and death tell the Christian what to avoid.

All these models are participants in the one drama of Jesus' Passion, death, and rising. They meet him as he moves along the way from the warmth of a familial meal, to the humiliation and pain of the cross, and the boundless joy and relief of the Resurrection. The Passion, painted as a journey, becomes the root metaphor of Christian life. This present worldly-bound life, full of falsehoods, pitfalls, and betrayals, is not the final destiny of the baptized. It is but a stage that

leads to another where true rest and relief from the torments of daily living are found. Christian life, then, is a journey from life to death to eternal life, and Jesus shows us the way.

AQUINO DE BELEN'S JESUS:  
CATOTO, T, CAIBIGAN

If Aquino de Belen's characters are static, there is a hidden dynamic and dramatic plot written into his poem. The *Mahal na Passion* is not mere narrative verse. It is didactic and exhortatory too. As didactic verse it teaches. As exhortatory verse it persuades and moves to action. It seeks to build a lasting bond between reader and Jesus as the final terminus of its rhetoric.

The poet presents Jesus under titles drawn from traditional catechesis. He is "Dios," "Anac nang Dios," and "Panginoon," or "Poon," also "icalauang Personas." But the triplet, Dios, Anac nang Dios, Panginoon (his equivalents for the Latin, "Deus," "Filius," and "Dominus," and the Spanish "Dios," "Hijo" and "Señor") dominate. He never uses the term "Verbo" (the Word) which we find in the *Casaysayan*.

For those schooled in Trinitarian distinctions, Aquino de Belen's reference to Jesus as "Poong Ama" (AqdB 22), "Amang mariquit" (AqdB 287) and "Dios Poong Maycapal" (AqdB 946), "Panginoong may capal/sa lupa,t, sa sanglangitan" (Aqdb 39) might be disconcerting. Did the poet not understand the Trinitarian distinctions? God the Father is not God the Son. Is creation attributed to the Father as salvation is to the Son? Elsewhere, Aquino de Belen shows that he is well aware of these distinctions. The dramatic episode of Christ's prayer at Gethsemani would not be fraught with conflict, if Jesus and the Father are presented as one and the same person. Here, Jesus struggles with the Father's will which he cannot yet make his own until the angel reveals Jesus' saving role as willed by God whom the angel describes as "Poon cong iyong Ama" (AqdB 96). Making sense of this apparent confusion in the poem leads us straight to Aquino de Belen's conception of Jesus. "Ama" in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a title of respect given to someone superior. The title itself mitigates the harshness associated with power that a superior had over an inferior. Thus, it was that bishops and other ecclesiastics were addressed in these familiar terms. The context of the referent to Jesus as "Dios Poong Maycapal," etc. is a lesson reminding the pasyon characters and the reader to remember their debt of gratitude to the Lord who showered them with gifts as a doting father does his children. The title "Anac nang Dios" did not convey this sense of intimate and

loving relationship between Jesus and others. Thus it was that attributes of Fatherhood were appropriated for Jesus.

All the terms describing Jesus are, in fact, relational words. If he is "Panginoon," then there is the corresponding "alipin" to whom he is Lord (AqdB 38). But he is Lord with a difference. In the long apostrophe addressed to Judas (AqdB 158-69) the traitor is reminded how gently and generously Jesus treated him. He chose him to be a companion, fed him, made him co-teacher with Jesus of the words of life, tablemate, and captain of his people. The Tagalog reader who used the *pasyon* must have envisioned his relationship with Jesus not in the same way as the chivalric Ignatius of Loyola envisioned his relationship with Christ the King, but in a manner more familial. Spanish colonial government lived with the legal fiction that the King took a personal hand in all the affairs of the colony. For the Spaniard, he was not far off, since he was personally represented by the governor general in the colonies. But we wonder if the Tagalogs may have found this king too grand and too remote for them. What was real were their own traditional leaders now made into local functionaries by the crown. These leaders functioned as fathers to whom a member of a town or barrio could turn. They were tablemates and companions. They did in times of danger recruit soldiers for the militia. But these same functionaries were corruptible and were known to be overbearing, as were the other functionaries of the Spanish hierarchy. Thus Aquino de Belen had to paint a picture of a Lord and Father who was wholly other. Thus, Jesus is described as "marangal," honorable, (AqdB 40) and "maalam" (AqdB 116). The latter adjective is a compliment. "Maalam" is he who knows the inner needs of others. As a leader he can anticipate his subjects' desires and take practical steps to respond to them.

How does Jesus respond to his subjects' needs? Though He is called "Messias," the term seems not to be operative in the text. Instead the poet opts to concretize Christ's role as the anointed and appointed of God by saying that Jesus is he who takes all unto himself. He is "mangangaco." The term's root is "ako," I. When I say "Ako ko," I take personal interest and responsibility for something. Thus, Jesus' act of salvation is not perceived as some grand event, though no doubt for the poet it is, but as something personal. Thus, Jesus is compared to a lawyer who takes someone's case. Here is the person on trial and Jesus takes it upon himself to defend the person and bring the case to a successful conclusion. His act of salvation is described as "icayari,t, icalutas/ nang osap nang tauong lahat" (AqdB 99). It is also described as "hadlang," interposing one's own body to prevent someone from falling into a pit (Aqdb 101 and 887-79). Jesus' saving act is compared



to healing. He is the "manlolonas" (AqdB 886). It is compared to gardening. Dimas is the first flower and the first fruit that springs from Jesus' Passion (Aqdb 880). It is compared to shepherding and giving light. He is "Pastor at ilao (AqdB 273).

All the titles and images that Aquino de Belen uses to describe Jesus are those that make him not a God remote and uncaring, but a companion close at hand. All these titles of Jesus are summarized in the terms of endearment "catoto," "ibig," "caybigan," and Mary's own term "bongso." Is there not a shade at all of harshness in Jesus? Harshness, no; power, yes. The poet reminds the reader that there is a judgment in store for the unrepentant, but the strict judge has given humankind a respite, humankind's day. While it is still day, the "maalam" God allows humans to have their sway. But the poet warns that sinner's days have an end and while time is still on his/her side, the sinner must use his days at investing (magdatna) in goodness (AqdB 947, also cf. AqdB 740-55).

The metaphor of the friendly God has its roots in John's gospel where Jesus says to his disciples "I do not call you servants any more because a servant does not know what his master is all about. Instead I call you friends since I have made known to you everything I have learned from the Father" (Jn 15: 16). Here, metaphor gives way to reality as Jesus points the way of union. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love. You will remain in my love if you keep my commandments, just as I have kept the Father's commandments and remain in his love" (Jn 15: 9-10). The Spanish mystics were enthralled by the illuminating vision that humans could in truth relate to a God as one does to a friend. Thus, Ignatius of Loyola exhorts his exercitant in the colloquies of the *Spiritual Exercises* (the most affective moment of prayer) to speak to God as "one friend speaks to another" (no. 54). Something of the mystics' vision is found in Aquino de Belen's portrayal of Jesus.

Elsewhere I have demonstrated that the setting-in-life for the *Mahal na Passion* is a wake where relatives and friends pay their last respects to the deceased.<sup>12</sup> Rafael's analysis of the prayers for the dying that precede the pasyon argues that Aquino de Belen acted as a broker between the baptized, paralyzed by the fear of death, and the afterlife. He reinvents death by declaring that its finality is apparent because beyond the gates of death lies glory.<sup>13</sup> These observations tell us that the life setting where the pasyon was sung is emotion-filled, filled with grief and loss. Is it a wonder, then, that Aquino de Belen should

12. Javellana, *Casaysayan*, pp. 12-13.

13. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, pp. 194-209.

opt for relational words when speaking of Jesus? By presenting a friendly Jesus he assuages the fear of death that the bereaved experience at this moment in their lives.

Aquino de Belen has skillfully guided his reader through his literary trap. Starting with "matalinhagang Tagalog," he enchants his reader with his mastery of the Tagalog tongue and his skillful play with images. He bridges remote Biblical experience and the life of his readers by creating evocative images woven from the experience and visual world of the eighteenth-century Tagalog. Then he makes the not too subtle twist of suggesting that his characters and the Jesus-story are themselves metaphors for life itself, for life as it should be led.

#### AQUINO DE BELEN'S LEGACY

Though many have not heard his name, much less known his *Mahal na Passion ni Jesuchristong Panginoon Natin*, Aquino de Belen's Christological work continues to influence those who read and chant the pasyon during Lent. He succeeded in giving a Filipino face to Jesus. He took him from the unfamiliar surroundings of Scripture and made him a denizen of the Philippine world where typhoons and floods raged, and where people were moved by such feelings as "hinanakit," "tampo," and "damay."

Master as he was of Tagalog, many of his ideas were not his own. He learned them from preachers and catechists, read them in catechisms and pious books. Like many of his contemporaries, he was indoctrinated into an ideology of salvation, which was understood as something akin to commerce. Debts had to be paid. Obligations settled, or else there was retribution.

His vision of history, like the typological exegetes, did not take change seriously. If indeed all things fell under the guiding hand of God and past events could point to future ones and present ones to past, then change was not the constitutive element of history, but rather the assurance, that somehow there was one story, and all were variations of this one tale. His vision of history appealed to his contemporaries as it continues to appeal to many Filipinos today, whose vision of history is static.

Can Aquino de Belen be called a theologian? If theology is defined as Anthony de Mello does: "The art of telling stories about the Divine. Also the art of listening to them,"<sup>14</sup> then Gaspar Aquino the Belen is the best Filipino theologian the eighteenth century had.

14. Anthony de Mello, *Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), p. xvi.