



# A THIRD LOOK AT JESUS WITH UNPRISTINE EYES

## ***Revisiting the Hermeneutical Suspicion of an Underlying National Democratic Perspective in Carlos Abesamis's A Third Look at Jesus***

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*"No one looks at the world with pristine eyes."  
- Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture*

*This article discusses how the now classic work of the Jesuit Carlos Abesamis, A Third Look at Jesus, was influenced by the national-democratic worldview and agenda. The author thinks that Abesamis, though not a member of the Nationalist Democratic movement, had embraced its outlook, spirit and struggles in his works and practice. Quejada considers the spirit of the movement as providing an important hermeneutical key to the understanding of his work. Beyond being an ideologue, however, the theologian Abesamis leads us to recover the dangerous memory of Jesus and his Kingdom. And at one point in our history, the author argues, "the national democratic movement represented for many of Jesus' followers the concrete historical context for the Kingdom's realization."*



When Carlos Abesamis's *A Third Look at Jesus*<sup>1</sup> came out in the late 1990s, the general reception to it was one of quiet, warm approval, mostly coming from kindred and like-minded colleagues in the theological circles, the progressive NGOs and formation institutes. Also, *A Third Look* could already then more easily brandish the heretofore suspect optic-of-the-poor paradigm. It had only

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Abesamis, *A Third Look at Jesus: A Catechetical Guidebook for Bible Facilitators, Catechists, Religion and Theology Teachers, Sisters, Deaconesses and Pastors* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988); idem, *A Third Look at Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989); idem, *A Third Look at Jesus: A Guidebook along a Road Least Travelled*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1999).



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been a few years since the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCPII), which formally adopted the vision of the Philippine Church towards becoming “a Church of the Poor”. Furthermore, the furor over liberation theology has somewhat died down since it reached its peak in the mid-80s. At its launch *A Third Look* invited little or no controversy. Having been initially made available to friends and kindred spirits, the book rather evoked their approving sense of seeing the application to theology and pastoral work of the outlook and spirit of the social movement that saw its most active period in the 1970s and the 1980s, and the beginning of its dissipation in the 1990s.

To many of its readers today, Abesamis’s *A Third Look* stands as a major work of “pastoral theology of the contextual kind.” To nearly all of its avid readers in the late 1990s, veterans of the social upheaval of the immediately preceding decades, it was an ingenious reformulation of Christian life of faith against the historical and paradigmatic context of the social movement of the 1970s and the 1980s. The terms of reference in the book had immediately familiar ring to them; its outlook and spirit reflected much of the same outlook and spirit of the then vibrant social movement – the national democratic movement of the 1970s and the 1980s.

Those discerning first readers quietly recognized *A Third Look*’s resonance with the socio-historical context of the national democratic movement. It was a recognition born not simply out of reading and doing a critical analysis of the book. It was a recognition also born out of acknowledging Abesamis’s involvement in the movement itself. Abesamis had always been reticent about any part or aspect of his involvement in the national democratic movement. “Natdem” or “ND” was a term that he never used in his discourse, in the classroom, in conferences or symposia or in his writings. [If he was part of the underground section of the national democratic movement, he never as much as gave a hint of it to anyone in the open and those in the know would confirm that he never really was part of the underground.] Yet his active presence and assiduous work in a number of then called “open ND organizations” and his frequent participation in rallies and mass actions unmistakably indicated how much he had embraced the outlook, the spirit and struggles of the movement. It was on this account that those in the ND movement



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who knew him did not hesitate to accord him the appellation of *Kasama*, in the same way that they accorded the same appellation to Renato and Letizia Constantino, Jose Diokno, Alejandro Lichauco and Bert Olalia. It is also therefore no wonder that the first readers of *A Third Look* immediately saw the efforts and struggles of the national democratic movement of the 1970s and the 1980s as the socio-historical context of his work.

### THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF THE 1970S AND 1980S

As its own history is now beginning to be written, the most prominent aspect of the movement's character that is treated is its history of struggle. Although predominant in the 1970s and the 1980s, the beginnings of the national democratic movement can be traced to the 1960s.

As in any social movement the face and conduct of its struggles were the national democratic movement's most easily recognizable and captivating aspects. In the open or "legal" arena, mass actions and rallies were frequent and as they were increasingly becoming bold, daring and massive. From small noisy marches and rallies by students on the main thoroughfares of Metro Manila, mass actions grew to take on the marks of uprisings, as in the First Quarter Storm of 1970 and the Diliman Commune in 1971. From then on and with the imposition of martial law in 1972, what started as a particularly student protest movement mainly centered on Metro Manila grew to become a social movement involving the participation of diverse sectors of Philippine society (workers, farmers, indigenous peoples, urban poor, middle-income workers, teachers, and church people) and confronting in a comprehensively interrelated thrust the various issues and problems of Philippine society, such as the country's long standing agrarian problem, the Filipino workers' plight, the indigenous peoples' struggle to keep their ancestral lands, the country's failing economy, the imposition of dictatorial rule. Particularly, the struggle against the Marcos dictatorial rule would acquire great impetus and invite the wider participation of the so-called middle forces with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983. But then a new outlook underlying these actions and struggles had now become



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apparent. It was an outlook that related these various issues and problems to one another and pointed to the overall indication of the country's massive and even worsening poverty stemming from the continued colonial exploitation of the country, mainly by the United States in collusion with local ruling elite. The Communist Party of the Philippines, having re-established itself in 1968 and having reorganized its armed wing, the New People's Army, proclaimed the onset of armed revolutionary struggle against "the three basic problems of Philippine society: imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism," in short, the US-Marcos dictatorship.

### **NEW CONSCIOUSNESS: THE SECOND PROPAGANDA MOVEMENT**

Though not entirely united under one organizational structure and centralized leadership, the social movement that emerged from the beginnings of the student protest movement of the late '60s and early '70s grew on the basis of a unity around some fundamental points of outlook. This outlook was dubbed as "new consciousness" that emerged from the proliferation of a new kind of political literature and a new manner of discourse. In 1966 Renato Constantino's "The Miseducation of the Filipino" first came out as an article written for *Weekly Graphic*. It signaled the start of a new wave of writing and analysis that put forth not only the thesis of the country's continued colonial subjugation but also the need of a new kind of consciousness to understand the country's problems, to seize the solution to these problems and to shape in the people the determination to work out this solution:

Education is a vital weapon of a people striving for economic emancipation, political independence, and political renaissance. We are such a people. Philippine education, therefore, must produce Filipinos who are aware of the country's problems, who understand the basic solution to these problems, and who care enough and have courage enough to work and sacrifice for their country's salvation.



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In recent years, in various sectors of society, there have been nationalist stirrings which were crystallized and articulated by the late Claro M. Recto. There were jealous demands for the recognition of Philippine sovereignty on the bases question. There were appeals for the correction of the iniquitous economic relations between the Philippines and the United States. For a time, Filipino businessmen and industrialists rallied around the banner of the Filipino First Policy, and various scholars and economists proposed economic emancipation as an immediate goal for our nation. In the field of art, there have been signs of a new appreciation for our own culture. Indeed, there has been much nationalist activity in many areas of endeavor, but we have yet to hear of a well-organized campaign on the part our educational leaders for nationalism in education.<sup>2</sup>

Though not coming from the initiative of the educational establishment, a well-organized campaign for nationalism did take place. It had been dubbed since as the Second Propaganda Movement. From the inspiration of student protest movements in Western Europe and the US, student and youth groups here adopted the practice of study sessions in discussion groups and ‘teach-ins’ outside of the instruction setting of formal schooling. (Later, these were followed and complemented by ‘exposures’ and ‘immersions’ in the workers’, farmers’ or urban poor communities.) Renato Constantino’s writings were a regular fare in these study sessions. So were the writings of Marx and Mao Zedong. In 1970, under the byline of Amado Guerrero, the Central Committee of the Communist Party put out *Philippine Society and Revolution*, the one single piece of literature that would have a tremendous impact on the spread of the movement’s outlook. In his Introduction, Amado Guerrero says:

*Philippine Society and Revolution* is an attempt to present in a comprehensive way from the standpoint of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung thought the main strands of Philippine history, the basic problems

<sup>2</sup> Renato Constantino, *The Miseducation of the Filipino* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1982), 1.



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of the Filipino people, the prevailing social structure and the strategy and tactics and class logic of the revolutionary solution – which is the people’s democratic revolution.

This book explains why the Communist Party of the Philippines has been re-established to arouse and mobilize the broad masses of the people, chiefly the oppressed and exploited workers and peasants, against US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism now regnant in the present semi-colonial and semi-feudal society.

*Philippine Society and Revolution* can be used as a primer and can be studied in three consecutive or separate days by those interested in knowing the truth about the Philippines and in fighting for the genuine and democratic interests of the entire Filipino people....<sup>3</sup>

In subsequent years, the use of *Philippine Society and Revolution* as basic study material for organizing work among the various sectors had become widespread, even as such study sessions and organizing work had been pushed underground by the imposition of martial rule in 1972. It became the most influential work that propagated comprehensively the Marxist worldview (outlook) in the study of Philippine society.

## **WORLDVIEW**

Following the heavy influence of what the movement came to refer to as Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, this worldview was known to consist of the three basic aspects of *standpoint*, *viewpoint* and *method*, and defined in terms of the philosophical foundation of the Marxist tradition: dialectical and

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<sup>3</sup> Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (Hongkong: Ta Kung Pao, 1970).



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historical materialism (DHM). *Standpoint* refers to DHM's view of reality as real, concrete, objective, historical and ever changing but scientifically knowable. From this view proceeds a theory of society that also assumes it to be real, concrete, objective, historical and changing but scientifically knowable. *Viewpoint* refers to one's historically determined position in society that in turn defines one's perspective towards reality; in the Marxist parlance, one's historically determined position in society is normally one's class position or status, or generally the peculiar position that one occupies or consciously, in the spirit of solidarity, appropriates within society's general pattern of exploitation and oppression. The dialectical *method* of analysis is guided by the following basic principles: interrelatedness of all reality, change and contradiction, concrete involvement in concrete reality.

The worldview allowed a new mode of looking at and understanding society. It pointed to the root of poverty of the majority of people, not in the predestined lot of them who were simply born in such unfortunate circumstance, but in the socially fashioned system of class exploitation and oppression. It also emphatically revealed that the exploited and the oppressed had it in them the power to change their lot. It was little surprise, therefore, that under martial rule whatever reference to "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought" became instantly suspect and demonized. As the movement, however, launched what it called the Second Propaganda Movement and undertook organizing work first among workers and peasants, and then with so-called "middle forces" (teachers, artists, health workers and church people) the quick and wide spread of this new world outlook could hardly be surprising. Its influence could be gleaned a little later from the new language the movement began developing for use in the open, especially among the middle forces – "history from the point of view of the Filipino people," "the optic of the poor, deprived, oppressed and exploited," "interrelatedness of events and phenomena." The analysis, perspective and subject matter that this outlook carried also became increasingly evident in the various art forms of the period – the cinema, literature, theatre, music. It was thus an outlook that was beginning to shape in the people a "new consciousness" that allowed them to understand their current national situation and its roots in the country's long and



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continuing colonial history. This new consciousness was also becoming “counter-consciousness”. Not only did it promote a new perspective in the understanding of Philippine history, it also exposed the blinders of colonial mentality that was well entrenched in people’s minds and culture, as it also engendered in the people a new sense of power to change the situation and make their own history.

## **THE NATIONALIST SPIRIT**

With this worldview came thus “the spirit of the movement” of the 1970s and the 1980s. The movement was a movement for social change. Many of its adherents would not mince words: it was a revolutionary movement for national liberation. As a movement, it had captivated the commitment and participation of the broad masses of the people to struggle for “national freedom and democracy.” In this struggle many had suffered intimidation and harassment from police and the military, imprisonment and torture, and death. What spirit drove a nation to unite and struggle in the face of tremendous odds and certain risks to life and limb? Undoubtedly, as in all revolutionary movements, it was the spirit of freedom, of liberation. The new consciousness that now had emerged clearly unraveled the country’s long history of colonial oppression and exploitation. Simply, it was the spirit of a people wanting to be an independent and prosperous nation, finally free from foreign domination and local elite rule. In the movement’s own terms, it was the spirit of nationalism.

In her article “What is Nationalism?” Letizia Constantino explains its historical context and meaning:

Nationalism has had a long history in our country. In our struggle for freedom, there have been periods when strong nationalist feelings fired our people to action and other periods when nationalism seemed to be forgotten. Not only did nationalism as a sentiment have its peaks and ebbs, nationalism as a political concept has been espoused at one time or another by different sectors of society which projected particular nationalist goals as their own interests and historical circumstances demanded....



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Recto had raised the banner of economic nationalism and clearly showed that the greatest obstacle to its realization is American imperialism which, acting in behalf of American corporate giants, pressures weaker states to open their economies to penetration and control. His definition of nationalism is still valid today:

“... a banner of freedom proclaiming the national interests of the people, to be promoted and safeguarded by themselves so that the fruits of their efforts and the wealth derived from their God-given resources shall accrue to them and thus enable all of our people to rise above poverty and march on to prosperity, contentment and dignity.”

From this definition, we can deduce the major characteristics of Filipino nationalism for our time. Nationalism is defensive, protective. Nationalists believe that the resources of our country should be for the benefit of our people today and in the future. Since our economy is increasingly being dominated by foreign corporations with the active intervention in their behalf of their governments, nationalism is necessarily anti-imperialist. This means, primarily, American and Japanese imperialism though it includes the operations of other advanced countries as well. However, anti-imperialism is not racism. Nationalists are not anti-American or anti-Japanese, they are only against those policies of governments that harm the interests of the Filipino people, policies which these governments pressure our government to adopt....

The nationalist goal is the welfare of the Filipino masses; therefore, the second major quality of nationalism is its mass character. Our people themselves must protect and advance their own interests. Nationalism should no longer serve the interest of one or another sector as in the past. Mass nationalism is therefore democratic; it believes in the greatest possible participation of the people in the determination of policy, particularly in the reorientation of our development program. Corollary goals of mass-based nationalism are a more



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equitable distribution of economic resources and a just and humane society.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the kind of nationalism that Letizia Constantino refers to is not that kind which Western political discourse talks about and associates with narrow national self-interests, racism, anti-immigration policies, and “ethnic cleansing”.

### **NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE**

Informed and moved by this spirit, the national democratic movement fought a struggle of resistance that had expressions in both the open parliamentary arena and the revolutionary armed sphere. The struggle reached a high point in the mid-1980s. Not only did the movement conjure a broad unity in struggle among the Filipino people, it also invited solidarity support from foreigners here and abroad. Aside from the width and breadth that its international network reached, such solidarity support was remarkable in the adoption of the movement’s very outlook and spirit. Issued in 1986, *A Call for Solidarity: A Letter of Concern from U.S. Missioners in the Philippines to the Christian Churches of the United States*<sup>5</sup> was a famous case in point.

### **NEW HOPE**

The nationalist spirit also underlined among the people a new found hope in a future where freedom and prosperity would reign and a steadfast faith that such a future would eventually come, no matter how protracted the struggle might be. Writing his reflections in prison where he was detained on suspicion of being a subversive, Karl Gaspar made the following entry in August 1983, which

<sup>4</sup> Letizia Constantino, “What Is Nationalism?” in *Issues without Tears*, vol II (Quezon City: Karrel Inc., 1984), 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> Philippine International Forum, *A Call for Solidarity: A Letter of Concern from U.S. Missioners in the Philippines to the Christian Churches of the United States* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1986).



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expressed the same hope and faith of many more Filipinos in the movement:

... As I finish writing this letter I remember two people who are a source of inspiration for me. One is a 67-year old school administrator and, the other, a 17-year old student. Despite the fifty year gap between them, they share one common dream: to see this country fully freed from poverty and oppression. Both, in their respective sectors, were committed to participate in the growing national movement for justice. These two people are proof that one is never too old or too young to become involved. Unfortunately, the administrator was recently killed in an accident.

The day he was buried I received a note from the student. I remembered how I used to carry her when she was just a five year old girl and we were first attending rallies and demonstrations in Manila in the pre-martial law days. Now she is a student at the State University and I heard from her father that she was a committed activist. Her short note to me was an attempt to provide comfort and consolation. I needed it badly that day as I prayed for the eternal peace of the school administrator. She said: “*Kuya*, don’t worry, we shall go on. Those in power rule now, but one day they will fall. One day we will be liberated!” Echoes of the Magnificat coming from a 17-year old girl, trying her best to provide courage in what is now a reversal of roles!<sup>6</sup>

### THE MOVEMENT AS CONTEXT

It would seem that Carlos Abesamis was reiterating the same hope and faith when towards the end of the 1990s, his book *A Third Look at Jesus* came out. It was a time when by all indications the movement had dissipated. That it really had dissipated and what the factors for this were, are questions that analysts, observers and followers are still struggling to understand today. But Abesamis was

<sup>6</sup> Helen Graham and Breda Noonan (eds.), *How Long? Prison Reflections of Karl Gaspar* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1984), 45.



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not really writing about the movement in *A Third Look*. He was simply writing from its context, its perspective and its spirit and, rather was writing and theologizing, about the focal subject of his book, *the Kingdom that Jesus has proclaimed through His mission*. The perspective of the movement, or better still, the perspective of its concrete circumstances, i.e., its perspective of hope for a life of freedom and prosperity and its perspective of faith in the realization for such a life, had provided Abesamis with the concrete historical basis for “a third look at Jesus” – that kind of look that, Abesamis submits, can only make intelligible the meaning of Jesus and His mission to present-day Filipinos.

The theme of *A Third Look* is something that Abesamis had been developing a long time before the book’s publication. He seemed to have been deeply reflecting on it way back in the 1980s when the movement was at the height of its strength. An earlier indication of this ongoing reflection was a paper he delivered at the Third Asian Theological Conference (ATC III) held in Suanbo, South Korea on July 3-8, 1989. The paper was entitled “A Third Look at Jesus and Salvation: A Bible Study on Mark 1:14-15.” In the article, Abesamis first laid down the theme that he would later develop in full in *A Third Look at Jesus*.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”  
(Mark 1:14-15)

This Bible study could bear several possible titles: “A Reflective Reading of Mark 1:14-15,” “Basic Insights into the New Testament,” or “A Third Look at Jesus and Salvation.”

There is a need for a third look at Jesus and salvation. Worthwhile things are always worth a second look, but in the case of Jesus, we need a third look as well. The first look is the way Jesus looks at himself. The second look is the Graeco-Roman, Western look – the view most of us



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have grown up with during the last nineteen hundred years. It is time for a third look. This third look happens to be also the third-world look at Jesus. It is the view from the prism of the struggling poor. The third look is very close to the first look, in a way in which the second look is not.

A few examples are helpful at this point. For both the first look and the third look, “eternal salvation” is understood as “fullness of life,” while for the second look it means the “life of the soul.” This type of dichotomy between the “soul” and “body” in the second look is also evident in its view of anthropology in which the soul (Greek *psyche*) is seen as a separate part joined to the body to constitute a human being. In both the first and third look, the human being is seen as whole person (cf. Hebrew *nepesh*). In its original sense, the “greatest commandment” has an expansive meaning. It is translated in the first look as “love/justice/compassion/ faithfulness” (cf. Matt. 23:23) and in the third look as “love/justice”; while in the second look, it is limited to “love.”

It becomes evident that the third look has a closer affinity to the first. However, in order to understand the third look, we need to use an indispensable exegetical instrument, namely, the eyeglasses of the struggling poor of the Third World.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of the “third look” as an exegetical instrument is not an established hermeneutical tool of biblical scholarship. It is an original construct by Abesamis. Although as a construct it reflects the thinking and influence of liberation theologians from Latin America, particularly that of his fellow Jesuit Jon Sobrino, “third look” is something Abesamis endeavored to develop from within the contextual resonance of the social movements of the 1970s and the 1980s in the Philippines with the Kingdom message for our time.

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Abesamis, “A Third Look at Jesus and Salvation: A Bible Study on Mark 1:14-15,” in *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Traditions*, ed. Virginia Fabella et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 135.



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Biblical scholars use a supermarket of instruments – historical, archaeological, linguistic, literary, form-critical, redactional, structural, sociological. This book makes sober and discerning use of these instruments. But it adds another: the Third Look. Yes, the Third Look is a ‘tool’ for biblical interpretation. One’s world-view, perspective, stand point – all this makes a difference in one’s interpretation of Jesus, of the Scripture, in fact, of life itself. There is indeed a battery of sophisticated tools for dissecting the Scriptures and you might be in control of them, but if your world-view is a mismatch to that of Jesus, you could miss. It is equally possible for someone, with no such bag of tools but possessing a heart and mind similar to that of Jesus, to see.<sup>8</sup>

The immediately foregoing quote provides the hint of what contribution the context of movement has given Abesamis in developing his “third look” construct – worldview and the spirit of nationalism (or what Abesamis refers to as “a heart and mind similar to that of Jesus”).

### **THE MOVEMENT’S WORLDVIEW IN *A THIRD LOOK***

First, on worldview. In *A Third Look* Abesamis does not really make use of dialectical historical materialism as Marxism so constructs it as an epistemological model. Rather, Abesamis makes pertinent application of that worldview he had experienced as having been concretely practiced in the movement. Surely, as a scholar and a perennial student of philosophy himself he has been familiar with Marxist thought. But his acceptance and adoption of what might be construed as “communist influence” into his writing did not just stem from a classroom or textbook knowledge of it but more from the experience of the life, thinking and struggle of a community in which he had been deeply immersed. Besides, the labels “Marxist” and “communist” are to him incorrect, inaccurate and inappropriate.

<sup>8</sup>Carlos Abesamis, *A Third Look at Jesus* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1999), 3.



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Marx did not invent the worldview; he merely rediscovered it. Even in the discovery of it, Abesamis would seem to say, the entire Judeo-Christian tradition was ahead of Marx. This is what Jesus himself clearly indicated when at the start of His ministry he went to the synagogue to pray and, quoting the prophet Isaiah, announced the meaning of His ministry.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4: 16-19)

It is in the light of this tradition that Abesamis makes the assertion in his book.

*First and Third Looks are Cousins.* The Third Look is very similar to the First. For example, let us see how the First and Third Looks would see Jesus in the face of hunger and hungry people. The Third Look would be ill-at-ease with Jesus that says: ‘hunger is the will of God, a cross God sends you in order for you to gain merits in heaven.’

The Third Look would be in search of a Jesus who says: “I want to see you freed from hunger.” Well, that in fact is the way Jesus sees himself. The Jesus who wants to feed rather than the Jesus who wants to inflict pain is the First Look Jesus. Thus, the concerns and questions of the conscientized poor are similar to those of Jesus – as I hope to rediscover with you, dear reader(s). The First and Third Looks are first cousins. The Second Look is a distant relative.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the framework of the worldview is discernible in *A Third Look*. Without using the labels *standpoint*, *viewpoint*, and *method*,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.



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Abesamis proceeds in his discourse very much along the spirit of the framework.

*Standpoint* refers to the view of reality as real, concrete, objective, historical and ever changing but scientifically knowable. Abesamis makes ample application of Standpoint in his book.

*Kingdom of God: Tentative Picture.* If the pre-crucifixion mission of Jesus was centered on the Kingdom of God, our inquisitiveness should now be focused on: what is the Kingdom of God? Surprisingly perhaps, Kingdom of God, as Jesus spoke about it, is poorly understood before by most Christians... For the time being, I offer a workable characterization of it: the Kingdom of God is a *new world on earth, to be consummated at the end of history*. It is *not* heaven.... The Kingdom of God, which is our ultimate destiny in the future will be a new earth here below. Furthermore, this new earth is filled with *life-blessings*. I intend to contrast 'life-blessings' with 'spiritual grace.' Life-blessings are rice, fishing grounds, education, good health and spiritual well-being – in short, any and every boon that gives any form of life. Life-blessings include, but are not limited to, spiritual grace, divine life, sanctifying grace or beatific vision.

Furthermore, these blessings come to *human beings*, *not to disembodied souls*.<sup>10</sup>

*Pre-crucifixion Mission: Well-Being for Humans.* Matthew's and Luke's signposts that we have just looked at are declarations of Jesus' pre-crucifixion mission, that is, of his mission before he died on the cross.... Matthew 11 and Luke 4 are, thank God, happy remnants of a tradition regarding the pre-crucifixion mission of Jesus. And that mission is centered on salvation. But what form does salvation take? It takes the form of life-blessings such as health for the sick, life to the dead, liberation from poverty for the poor, freedom to the oppressed and prisoners... The life-blessings cited in these

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.



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signposts by Matthew and Luke – good news to the poor, sight to the blind, etc. – are, as we shall soon see, nothing less than concrete manifestations of the Kingdom of God...<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the Kingdom of God and salvation, Abesamis's application of this kind of standpoint is so widely made on practically every issue or subject that he discusses in the book (the meaning of the Beatitudes, the Aramaic sense of the *spirit*, the biblical jubilee year, etc.) such that he finds it on occasion necessary to apologize for being repetitive. Also, in his somewhat lengthy discussion of the Kingdom of God, one may sometimes forget that it is Abesamis who is talking, as he sounds very much like, Karl Gaspar's 17-year old activist friend dreaming of liberation.

*Viewpoint* refers to one's historically determined position in society that in turn defines one's perspective towards reality; in the Marxist parlance, one's historically determined position in society is normally one's class position or status, or generally the peculiar position that one occupies or consciously, in the spirit of solidarity, appropriates vis-à-vis society's general pattern of exploitation and oppression. The matter of Viewpoint is something that Abesamis discusses outright at the beginning of the book.

*The Third Look: Through the Eyes of the Poor.* What is the Third Look? It could simply mean a view that follows the Second, once the Second is seen to be inadequate. More significantly, however, the Third Look is the view of the Third World peoples. It is a look at Jesus, his life and his work – by and through the eyes of the poor peoples of the Third World. It is the look at Jesus by the poor and oppressed, the awakened, struggling and selfless poor, who want to create a just, humane and sustainable world. It is also the view of people who themselves are not poor but are in genuine solidarity with the poor.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2.



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Viewpoint in *A Third Look* also heavily underlies the spirit of nationalism that Abesamis appropriates for his discourse, as we shall see shortly.

The dialectical *method* of analysis is guided by the following basic principles: interrelatedness of all reality, change and contradiction, concrete involvement in concrete reality. In *A Third Look* the spirit of the dialectical method of analysis is also evident in its wide application. The Third Look is contrasted with the Second Look and closely related with the First Look. The Kingdom of God cannot be divorced from the concrete historical reality. (“The Kingdom of God, which is our ultimate destiny in the future will be a new earth here below.”<sup>13</sup>) The basic method involved in the discovery of the Third Look is immersion in the lives of the poor, getting involved in their lives. From thence proceeds a viable “Kingdom practice” in helping bring about liberation. Even the style that Abesamis adopts for his narrative, that is, the journey to and with every sector of the poor and the oppressed, evokes the spirit of the dialectical method. It is through their eyes and lives together that the Kingdom of God shall be realized. Abesamis concludes “Stopover 13: Under a Tree, Beneath Clear Skies,” with the following:

*Historical, Social, Individual.* Jesus had a historical and societal purview, for the Reign-Kingdom of God really was a new world and a new history. Jesus was in the line of the Hebrew-Jewish tradition for whom salvation had a historical, social and individual character. Historical, because this tradition saw salvation as a new history. Social, because the blessings – peace, justice, joy, health – are not just for individuals but for society, humankind and the world. And individual, because salvation was for the individual too.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13. 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 157.



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### NATIONALIST SPIRIT IN *A THIRD LOOK*

The spirit of nationalism also underlies Abesamis's exposition and narrative in *A Third Look*. Though he initially refers to the general viewpoint of Third World peoples as the Third Look viewpoint, he particularly specifies such viewpoint with that of the Filipino people in the stopovers of his narrative with the various sectors of Philippine society. Thus the poverty brought about by "systemic" oppression and exploitation of Third World peoples, as well as their hopes, dreams and struggles, is inevitably exemplified in the author's exposition of his experience of immersion and Kingdom-practice with his own people. Two particular stopovers are particularly revealing of this spirit: "Stopover 10: At the deathbed of a Nationalist Heroine" and "Stopover 11: Gathering of People's Organizations."

*What Is It All About?* In this stopover, we find ourselves at the bedside of a human rights worker. She lies in critical condition, after being wounded by a military armalite. After a lifetime of commitment, and facing possible death, she asks: is it all about going to heaven? Or is it accompanying humankind toward the final Kingdom of God?

A few years ago, if I had been asked, 'Which moment of our life is the most crucial? – I would have had no second thought. I would answer, 'the moment of death of each individual person.' In my mind, that moment was associated with the soul's subsequent fate: eternal damnation or bliss. And it was my task to bring souls to heaven. But people like our dying host and, of course, the biblical Jesus, have taught me that it is not all about going to heaven at death. It is also about helping to move history towards the definitive Kingdom of God of the future.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 104-105.



### ***A Third Look at Jesus with Unpristine Eyes***

Abesamis is almost paraphrasing the title of Jose Diokno's book *A Nation for Our Children*.

But at "Stopover 11: Gathering of People's Organizations," Abesamis bursts into an agitated call against continuing colonial domination through globalization in a tirade that is quite uncharacteristic of him.

Globalization is the anti-thesis of the Kingdom of God. Motivated by Jesus summons, let us join our present hosts – organizations of youth, environmentalists, women, workers, peasants, mothers, overseas workers, drug and alcohol rehab groups, indigenous peoples, small vendors, urban poor and other grassroots organizations – who assert, in word and action, that something of the new earth has got to be visible and tangible today. Kingdom-work means to join in the global project to find alternative paradigms for living and being in the globe, our home. Like our hosts and like Jesus, may we be able to say: "The Kingdom of God – or something of it – is already among us."<sup>16</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The national democratic movement of the 1970s and the 1980s makes for the socio-historical background of Carlos Abesamis's *A Third Look at Jesus*. Particularly, the movement's worldview and nationalist spirit have shaped the content and direction of his exposition. Indeed, to the making of this work the contribution that the movement had given cannot be glossed over. And as background, the movement provides an important hermeneutical key to the understanding and appreciation of Abesamis's work.

However, Abesamis's appropriation of the national democratic perspective does not indicate for him an espousal of an ideology-based tool. Rather, it indicates the re-discovery of a perspective that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 128.



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has been a constant strain in the Judeo-Christian narrative for ages, a perspective that begs remembering of Jesus' own.

The book came out in the late 1990s when the national democratic movement seemed to have all but dissipated. Abesamis seemed to be saying a pained message: At one point, the national democratic movement represented for many of Jesus' followers at our time a concrete historical context of realizing the Kingdom-work. The work is not done yet.

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