

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE INFANCY NARRATIVES AND THE APOLITICAL DEVOTION TO THE SANTO NIÑO

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The historians' quest for Jesus of Nazareth continues to influence contemporary biblical scholarship on the "political Jesus," but their findings have not really made an impact on baptized Christians at the pastoral and popular levels. In an examination of one Filipino popular devotion, the Santo Niño (or the little Child Jesus), this essay realizes two facets of Christological tradition. On the one hand, the devotional prayers particularly present an "a-historical Jesus" that reinforces the status quo of domination and marginalization in society. On the other hand, such devotions are ways of the masses to survive the harsh realities of life, if not to offer an alternative world that subverts the existing social order. It is this double truth of popular devotions that can serve as openings for historical and biblical scholarship to help in the nurturing of the faith that is able to transform socio-political realities.

From a theological perspective, the very idea of incarnation means that the Son of God chose to participate in human history at a particular point in space and time, and was inevitably enmeshed in the politics of his day. Being truly human, Jesus was part of a particular religious and social setting where political tensions and conflicts were unavoidably present. Contemporary popular devotion, however, seemingly gives us an apolitical picture of Jesus.

This essay tries to contrast and relate two realities. While both point to the infant or child Jesus,¹ the image they paint of him are, at least at first glance, miles apart.

1. For our purposes here, we are not overly strict with the distinction between devotion to the Divine Babe and to the Holy Child. We are aware though that historically, devotion to the Holy Child as distinct from the Divine Babe reached its peak in Europe in the 16th century. See, Rosa Tenazas, *The Santo Niño of Cebu* (Manila: Catholic Trade, 1965), 4.

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On the one hand, there is the popular devotion to the *Santo Niño* (literally: Holy Child). Any study on how Filipinos view Christ cannot exclude this devotion which is the most popular form of piety to the Son of God.² Furthermore, the image of the Santo Niño is historically the first Christian religious symbol that the natives encountered. The devotion traces its origin back to the beginnings of Christianity in the Philippines.³ It is said that the Magellan expedition that arrived in Cebu in 1521 first gave this image to the rulers of those who dwell in the village which we now call Cebu City. The first baptisms were performed after the image was shown to the natives. In 1565, the Legaspi expedition saw evidences that the early Cebuanos were praying before this image.⁴

On the other hand, exegetes and historians today react to the unwarranted spiritualization of the infancy narratives and their divorce from concrete historical struggles. These historians hold that these narratives have to be situated in the context of an anti-imperial struggle.⁵ While these scholars do not claim that the infancy narratives are historical accounts, they assert that they are written in view of the context of first, the Roman rule which the Jews found oppressive and the self-serving collaboration given to it by a few Jewish groups. Secondly, there is the hope of the Jewish people in general for liberation from this subjugation.

2. Most attempts to come up with a “Filipino Christology” have at least a short section on the Santo Niño. See, Douglas Elwood and Patricia Lagdameo, “*Christ in Philippine Context*” (Quezon City: New Day, 1971), 6; Pedro Sevilla, *People’s Faith is People’s Power: A Filipino Christological Catechism* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1986), 12; Benigno Beltran, *Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus Christ* (Manila: Divine Word, 1987), 121.

3. The author also wishes to state that being a native of Cebu where the devotion to the Santo Niño is most popular, he has personal experience on how this devotion is practiced.

4. See, John Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1987), 16-17; and Tenazas, *Santo Nino of Cebu*, 18-28.

5. Confer Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Birth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Richard Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

The structure of this essay is as follows: Firstly, it tries to show how the infancy narratives are seen by scholars today. Secondly, it demonstrates how the Santo Niño devotion has presented a picture which is seemingly devoid of any political context, and which differs from what scholarship depicts to be the social, religious and political matrix the child Jesus found himself in. Obviously, the contrasting pictures are inevitable since scholarship on the one hand, and popular religiosity on the other hand, belong to different language games (that is, the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith,” respectively). But there is an implicit question in presenting the contrast: can popular religiosity appropriate the results of scholarship so the faithful can be guided in their discernment on questions which are political in nature? The third part is an attempt, though tentative, to offer an alternative hermeneutical paradigm that consciously attempts to retrieve from this devotion some elements that would contribute to a liberationist reading. In this third part, we thus avoid the pitfalls of and put nuances to the Marxist critique of popular religiosity that sees popular devotions simply as a tool to subjugate the oppressed class.

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

Though we focus on works which give anti-Roman imperialism as the hermeneutical key to understand the infancy narratives, it is important to point out that in the other works by the authors we cite here, this same key is invoked to construct a fuller reconstruction of Jesus’ earthly life.⁶ However, we limit ourselves to their reading of the infancy narratives as found in the Gospels.

6. Cf. Richard Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of the Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Horsley and Neil Asher Silverman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: a Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

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Both *The Liberation of Christmas* by Richard Horsley and *The First Christmas*, co-authored by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, reject the disjunction between history and myth to describe the infancy narratives, although they use different categories to escape from the classical dilemma. For Horsley, the infancy narratives can be classified as historical legends wherein the meaning intended by the evangelist should be the reader's focus, not the choice between historical veracity and fictional myth.⁷ Borg and Crossan, on the other hand, liken the infancy narratives to parables, based on biblical tradition, which serve as overtures to the whole Gospels according to Matthew and of Luke. In other words, they are like an introductory music to a musical play: they cannot be missed if one wishes to understand the whole play. And just like the parables that the adult Jesus would later skillfully weave, these infancy stories were intended to be subversive or anti-empire. Thus, though there may be some differences in the terms they use, both works are basically similar in the lenses with which they see these introductions to the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke.

What can the prism of anti-imperialism see which other lenses cannot? Several points can be seen, as we will explain below. To give order to our presentation, we try to look at the different characters and relate them with Jesus.

Caesar and the Child Jesus

Let us first take Augustus, the Roman Caesar who was thought to be "One who is Divine."⁸ He decreed to have a census of "all the world," (Lk. 2:1). Often, this census is interpreted to merely give a concrete historical context to the birth of Jesus. But viewing the birth stories with anti-imperialism as the lens, Horsley argues while this census or enrollment in Luke may not be historical,⁹ yet it depicted the oppressive nature of the taxation system then. Jesus was born in

7. Horsley, *Liberation of Christmas*, 19.

8. Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*, 61.

9. Indeed, scholars today say that the Lukan chronology here is dubious. While there was a census ordered by Quirinius, governor of Syria in 6 AD, he was not the governor of Syria while Herod was alive. See, Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 94-95.

Bethlehem, according to the story, because Joseph and Mary had to go there for the census. The census then was used to systematize tax collection from people who were already burdened by it. Indeed, historical records attest that there were Jewish groups that resisted the tributes imposed on them. Another likely motivation of the empire was the possible enlistment of men for military service. We therefore can say that it is almost certainly the intention of the evangelist to picture the Son of God as coming into a world that was experiencing oppression and who was in solidarity with the victims. These victims are represented most especially by shepherds (Lk. 2:8).

The title Son of God (Lk. 1:35) could have been also a direct challenge to the Roman emperor who was accorded the same title. In Roman imperial thought, Caesar was the savior who was thought to have pacified the earth.¹⁰ By giving Jesus this same title as early as the infancy narratives, the evangelist Luke, or the early Christians in general, would affirm that the embodiment of divinity and of the ideal peace is this baby Jesus.

Borg and Crossan assert that the genealogy of Jesus, even with their obvious divergences in the Matthean and Lukan versions, is to be seen as a challenge to the pretensions of Augustus. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel shows his Davidic lineage. In Luke's Gospel, it is shown that Jesus is the "son of Adam, son of God" (Lk.3:38).

By way of a parenthetical remark, it is significant to point out here that, using different lenses, the well-known biblical scholar Raymond Brown primarily takes the genealogies to mean that the Christmas story begins all the way back to the time when Abraham begot Isaac.¹¹ But Borg and Crossan see the genealogies as a challenge to the claim that the ascendants of Augustus go all the way back to Aeneas who, after escaping from Troy and being guided by Venus,

10. See, Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*, 37; Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 33-38. Cf. also, Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary of the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 415.

11. Raymond Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives Preparing for the Birth of Jesus Matthew 1 and Luke 1* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988), 18. See also, Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 66-69.

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reached Rome. The image of Aeneas, with his father and son, was common in the Roman empire. But the genealogies of Jesus would challenge this imperial image, depicting Jesus as the one who can trace his origins back to God.

Lastly, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, called the city of David (Lk. 2:4), signifies the infant's future role as a Davidic non-violent Messiah. His birth gave hope to the people who were longing for someone who would defeat their enemies.

Herod and the Child Jesus

The anti-imperial lenses can also discern the significance of Herod, the king of Judaea under the Romans. We now know from ancient Jewish historian Josephus that he built edifices in honor of the Roman emperor Augustus. Both the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke tell us that the birth of Jesus took place during the reign of Herod. But it is only the Gospel of Matthew which gives us the story of Herod trying to perpetuate himself in power and massacring the infants. The story then continues that the family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary had to go to Egypt to escape the atrocities of Herod. Here, the allusion to the Moses-Pharaoh conflict in Exodus is inescapable. Just like Pharaoh, Herod also tried to kill the infants. And just like Moses, Jesus was spared from the massacre because God was guiding the events of history. Clearly then, the subversive message was that Herod is the new Pharaoh while Jesus is the new Moses.¹²

The Singers of Liberation

It is in the light of the hope that a “this-worldly” salvation from oppression that the hymns of praise in the infancy narratives can be interpreted. The songs, most notably Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's Benedictus and Simeon's prophecy, would express the hope for liberation which was originally given a this-worldly meaning.¹³ In the Magnificat, Mary sees herself as a servant who praises God who

12. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 39-52; Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*, 37.

13. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 107-123.

raises up a mighty savior, who brings down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly. Zechariah also invoked the prophetic promise that God would deliver his people from their enemies, and from the hands of all who hate them.

Besides Zechariah and Mary, two other named characters, Simeon and Anna, are pictured to have all been waiting for the coming of their savior. Simeon gives thanks to God for allowing him to see the longed for savior. Anna is depicted as an old prophetess who stayed in the temple, fasting and praying for the coming of Israel's redeemer.

Before we go to the next section, let it be said by way of a postscript to this section that according to these scholars, the narratives of Jesus' infancy or childhood reflect the anti-imperial stance of the adult Jesus.

THE APOLITICAL JESUS OF POPULAR RELIGIOSITY¹⁴

Since the image of the Santo Niño was introduced by an expedition that represented the Spanish empire, one may be tempted to immediately think that the image was a colonial tool for the conquest of the natives. Furthermore, the discovery of the image by one soldier of the Legaspi expedition was interpreted as a sign that they stayed for God. Thus, one may say that the image served, even if unwittingly, the purpose that was opposite that of the infancy narratives.

14. Originally, this essay also treated another popular Filipino image of Christ, the Black Nazarene. But for the sake of brevity and keener focus, we have decided that the Black Nazarene devotion can be the object of another study. Let it be said, however, that the popularity of the Santo Niño and the Black Nazarene manifests traditional Catholic devotion that seems to disregard what Jesus stood for, as if nothing happened between his birth, childhood, on the one hand and death on the other. Perhaps, popular religiosity is a reflection of or related to official doctrine as stated in the Nicene Creed which jumps from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "he suffered, died and was buried." There is no mention of the program of the reign of God which Jesus inaugurated. In this connection, the late Pope John Paul II deserves to be commended for bringing into the popular devotion the ministry of Jesus by introducing the Luminous Mysteries. Previously, from the Joyful Mysteries we jump into the Sorrowful Mysteries, without any explanation what led to the latter.

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However, caution is necessary before one makes the above conclusion. For one, as products of their historical milieu, the early Spanish missionaries may have believed that they were saving the souls of the natives by converting them to the Catholic faith. Secondly, we cannot also simplistically render a negative judgment on the missionaries using as our basis our contemporary sensitivities against colonization. Thirdly, it is anachronistic to expect that this devotion as introduced by the Spanish missionaries appropriate the political context of Jesus' birth and childhood. Moreover, if the missionaries presented a Christ that seemed divorced from historical and political contexts, it was not principally because such an apolitical picture would serve the interest of the empire. Rather, a docetic Christ was prevalent in this period of Church history, including Spanish church history.¹⁵ It was a kind of Christology that practically saw no importance to the historical contexts of his life.

But having given these cautions, we study whether this devotion has served as a liberating instrument that enables the devotees to appreciate the political dimension of the Christian faith. Our working hypothesis here is that Catholic devotional practices can be a principal tool in linking Christian faith and its ethical dimensions, which includes politics. An example from our history can readily be cited: Reynaldo Ileto, in a groundbreaking work on Philippine historiography, has demonstrated how the *pasyon* provided the masses "a language to ventilate ill feelings against oppressive friars, *principales* and agents of the state."¹⁶ This statement of course logically presupposes that there were ill feelings against authorities which were prior to the reading of the *pasyon*.

The Novena to the Sto. Niño

The current novena was composed in 1965, on the occasion of the fourth centennial of Christianization of the Philippines.

The apolitical nature of this devotion is seen in the official novenas themselves. While there is in the prayer the touching promise to follow

15. Elwood and Lagdameo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 2-4.

16. Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila, 1998, 5th printing), 16.

God's will,¹⁷ there is no indication how this will is to be discerned. Much less is there any hint that the child soon became an adult who demanded that we live by the values of the Gospel.

In several parts of these novenas, prayers are based on other-worldly spirituality: The most explicitly other-worldly can be this prayer: "*Tudlo-I ako, hinigugmang Santo Nino sa ka way bili sa kalibutan, sa kabamili sa langit, sa kamubo sa panahon, sa kataas gayod sa eternidad.*"¹⁸

Moreover, the Holy Child is primarily invoked as a helper in times when the devotee is alone, sorrowful, tested, disturbed, angry, etc. There is hardly any prayer that the Santo Niño would disturb and afflict our consciences whenever we have been unjust to our fellow men and women. Hardly is there any mention of biblical stories the holy infant himself was a victim of political machinations: He had to go to Egypt because Herod wanted to perpetuate himself in power. There is neither any trace of the idea that his coming was seen as the fulfillment of the Israelites' hopes that God "would pull down the princes from their thrones and lift up the lowly," that the same God would "deliver them from the hands of their enemies to serve him in holiness"

Admittedly, included in the novena are scattered petitions that the devotee praying may not be self-indulgent and be concerned with one's fellow human being. But these prayers do not spell out the broader social and political context of one's concern for the fellow men or women. Immediately after the devotee laudably prays "*nga magmadasigon ako alang sa kaayohan sa akong isigkatawo*"¹⁹ s/he continues with another other worldly theme, "*nga magtamay ako ingon sa angay sa mga butang sa kalibutan.*"²⁰

To further drive home this point, we may contrast the above prayers to another popular novena, that of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Explicitly, the devotee petitions Our Lady: (and for every petition the response is made, "O Mother ever help us.")

17. "Buut ako sa tanan nga pagbut-an Mo, tungod kay imong pag-buut, subay sa imong pag-buut, kutob sa gidugayon nga Ikaw magbuut. (English translation: We wish what you wish, because you wish, as you wish, as long as you wish.)

18. Free translation: Teach me dear Sto. Nino, that the world is without value, that heaven is priceless, that time is fleeting, that eternity is timeless.

19. "... that I may be enthusiastic for the welfare of my fellow human being"

20. "... that I may justly despise worldly things."

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- That we and lending agencies in the guise of helping others may not destroy people by collecting unjust high interest rates
- That we may never interfere with justice by bribery or perjury
- That we may rise above personal considerations when called on to serve the community or to vote
- That we never lose sight of the beauty of our country and the goodness of our people.
- That we may bring everything in our power to bring about justice, peace and progress in our land.

The Santo Niño as Seen by the Devotees

Although the principal materials for our study here are the two prayer booklets containing the annual novena to the Santo Niño and the perpetual novena recited every Friday (we note here that calling the latter a novena may be a misnomer), we also touch on popular legends, personal testimonies about and devotions to the holy infant.

How the people appropriate this devotion can be gleaned from this revealing statement of the first Cebuano prior and rector of the Basilica del Santo Niño:

‘Another woman’ was looking for me to give a whole roasted pig for she was healed of cancer after she asked help from the Santo Nino. ‘Another couple’ went to my office asking me to baptize their child for their child is an answer to their petitions to the Santo Nino. ‘Another man’ was asking me to bless his new car... He opted for the car to be blessed in the Basilica, for it is in this church that he asked for it. When ‘another calamity’ happened outside Cebu, we could hear from church authorities the call to give thanks to our dear Santo Niño that Cebuanos are freed from such danger and calamity.²¹

21. Fr. Andrew Batayola, “Preface”, in *Pit Señor: Miracles of Santo Nino de Cebu* by Michael J. Belonio, Jigger Latoza, and J.I.E. Teodoro (Iloilo: University of San Agustin, 2007), vii.

We start with the last sentence which, although attributed to church authorities, reflects popular homilies and devotions: the Sto. Nino is often seen as the protector of the Cebuanos from different calamities. Thus, it is believed that whereas other provinces in the Philippines are often visited by typhoons and floods – and even occasional earthquakes – Cebu has been relatively spared from the wrath of nature due to the protection of the Santo Niño. This in itself would encourage Cebuanos to believe that they are God’s favorites, or that their patron is stronger than the patron of people coming from provinces that may have been devastated by natural calamities. This relative protection from natural disasters may indeed simply strengthen a prior idea that all Cebuanos are God’s chosen since of all the provinces in the Philippines, it was in Cebu that Christianity was born.

But the first few sentences of the quote also reveal that the Holy Child is seen as someone who can answer private needs of the devotees. No doubt, there are some devotees who are able to see the political dimension of following Jesus. We then, can equally be certain that homilies have been delivered to establish a link between the devotion and the need to develop a strong social conscience. But still, from the many accounts, it would seem that the Santo Nino is seen as protector and provider.

However, there is also an account that at a time when the Cebuanos felt the need for rain and they were slow in coming,

the early Cebuanos brought the image in a procession to the sea and dipped the image in it, threatening to leave Him there if He did not give them rain immediately. When the drought persisted, the people would prostrate themselves, ask to be forgiven, and then rain would then come.²²

This story would give the impression that people tended to treat the Santo Niño the way they would treat other children – to be threatened and to be appeased. This in turn would give credence to

22. Lourdes Quisumbing, “Religious Experience in the Senor Santo Nino Devotion in Cebu,” in *Filipino Religious Psychology*, ed. Leonardo Mercado (Tacloban: Divine Word University, 1977), 64.

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the critique that the popularity of the devotion would perpetuate infantilism (pun unintended) in our faith since the child cannot make demands on adults. Rather, it is the other way around: we normally make demands on a child.

A NEW HERMENEUTICS?

In this third and final section, we highlight some forgotten aspects of the devotion that can serve as basis for a Santo Niño that can protest against attempts to make it a tool for conquest.

Appropriation by the Natives

Although the image itself was introduced by the colonizers to the natives who were eventually colonized, and thus can be interpreted as part of the process of subjugation, still the natives themselves appropriated it for their own ends and this fact can give room for a new hermeneutics that can take the devotion as inspiration for liberation. Indeed, even if we broaden the problematic to the introduction of the Christian faith in particular or the Spanish culture in general, (and not just the image of the Santo Niño) the Filipinos did not passively receive attempts to Hispanize them.²³ In other words, they tried to fit Spanish culture in a way that was acceptable to them. But how was this process of “active appropriation” true in the case of the Santo Niño devotion?

First of all, it can hardly be said that the first natives to be baptized intellectually understood the new faith. We can certainly surmise that they accepted the image in view of what they understood by it.

Secondly, indeed records show that they appropriated the Holy Child to their own ends. When the Legaspi expedition found the image housed in a hut, the image was dressed in native costume: The historian of this devotion writes,

23. Cf. Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo, 2000); John L. Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1959).

... the image was perfectly preserved. But as regards its original garments, it seems only its red velvet bonnet (red Flemish hat) was intact. We may surmise that the image's clothes were apportioned among devotees as relics, for when found, the Santo Nino was dressed in the native style and material. Hanging about its neck was a necklace of peculiar make with a small cross attached...²⁴

We notice that the quote implies a struggle between how the Spanish missionaries wanted the Holy Child to be prayed to and how the natives indeed worshipped him. It was highly possible that from 1521 when the image was given first to the natives up to 1565 when the image was re-discovered by another expedition sponsored by the Spanish throne, the natives prayed before the image the way they wanted to. They dressed the image their way.

The *sinulog*, a dance now associated with the Santo Niño devotion also antedates the image. It was the natives' own appropriation of what was given to them and which is now popularly practiced by the devotees today, as a testament that the devotion evolved partly on the terms of the natives themselves.

That the devotion was owned by the natives and beyond the control of the Augustinian missionaries can be perceived in numerous popular tales about the Holy Child taking a stroll into the streets of the city. One popular legend that can be interpreted as a protest at least against centralization goes: When Legaspi made Manila the capital city, it was decreed that the image should be shipped likewise to the north. Yet the crate arrived in Manila empty. The process was repeated a number of times and with each repetition there was a fresh attempt to make pilferage more difficult. But all these new crates arrived in Manila empty. Only in the seventh attempt did the image finally reached what was supposedly its new home, the new capital. But the image kept disappearing in Manila and reappearing in Cebu. The Augustinians in Manila even cut the legs of the image off, to stop it from returning to Cebu. Manila eventually gave up, and the legs were restored in Cebu.²⁵

24. Tenazas, *Santo Niño of Cebu*, 27-28.

25. Nick Joaquin, *Culture and History* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1988), 99.

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To Turn Away from Idols

The account of Spanish chronicler Pigafetta tells us that he showed the image to the queen while the priest was getting ready to baptize her. The queen expressed the desire to have the image as a replacement of her idols and Pigafetta thus gave her the image.

While the original context suggests that the idols referred to the beings who may have been the object of the natives' worship, still we can invoke Paul Ricoeur's concept of the surplus of meaning and take the Santo Niño devotion as a rejection of any thing or person that we consider our own absolute in life, even as we profess propositional faith in God. Just as the infancy narratives were written as protest against the pretensions of the Roman empire, the devotion can be an expression of the devotees' belief that any other person or thing has to be subordinated in relation to the Holy Child.

The Playfulness and the Sacredness of a Child

While there are valid points in the criticism that the devotion encourages infantilism in the faith of Filipinos since the devotees tend to forget the radical demands of the adult Jesus, still worshipping a child can be open to novel interpretations. First, in the famous allegory of Nietzsche, the child represents someone who is not burdened by tradition and can create his/her own values. Thus, without embracing the atheism of this German existentialist, we can take this devotion as our willingness to constantly recreate our own selves.

Secondly, the very idea of worshipping a child should remind that children continue to be victims of the power play of adults in our society today: street children roam around the cities, child labor is rampant in several industries, children together with women are innocent casualties in war-torn areas, and pedophiles prey on their poor victims. The devotion should teach us that the Son of God opted to be among the victims.

CONCLUSION

It is not suggested whatsoever that a Christian spirituality that is based on popular religious devotions is inferior to a Christianity based on the knowledge of the convictions that the historical Jesus deeply held. Indeed, there are many Christians who join these devotions and who have shown extraordinary commitment on the level of politics. But we assume that such Christians do not see the link between these devotions and their political commitment. Most would continue their devotions for reasons that may be personally meaningful for them but they often live two unconnected worlds: the world of religious devotion and the social and political context of the devotees. This essay raises the issue of how the two can be connected. The points in the last section can help in the re-formulation of the novena prayers.

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