

# WALKING WITH FEET ON THE MUDDY EARTH

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**T**his synthesis draws out a few implications of the essays in this volume, as well as the plenary discussions during the DaKaTeo conference on “Politics and Christian Tradition.” I have chosen the implications for Christian holiness.

The conference did not raise so much fuss on whether Christian tradition and politics are related or not. There were discussions to bring the issue to the floor, but there was also a shared sentiment that Christians and their churches have always been political, in one way or another. Even the posture of “disengaged pacificism” (Odchigue), often in the guise of “purifying reason and inspiring ethical political participation” (Genilo) - these are already forms of political action. In fact, the conference examined the various positions that the Churches, especially the Catholic community, through its hierarchy vis-à-vis social problems. The conference as a whole is critical yet constructive of the church’s political activities.

The real question for the conference, however, was about where the link between religion and society, faith and politics, is meaningfully defined and effectively forged, what kind of involvement should Christians and their churches get into, on what basis is this link justified in the Christian tradition and socio-political theories, and more crucially, with whom and for whose interests and benefits is such political involvement.

These questions lead to a discernment of the praxis of holiness, which I describe as a journey of choosing how we are to walk, which way to walk, which way to turn, and with whom we choose to walk. The ground which the authors propose for Christians and

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their churches to walk on is a muddy one. The more we are immersed and walking on the muddy world of the people's struggle between life and death, the more the relationship between politics and Christian tradition is engendered and must be nurtured.

This kind of walking is coming from a particular context, especially in the Philippines. Christian holiness has been confined to the private sphere that is practiced by the individual. What has developed is a privatizing faith which focuses almost solely in the personal experience, and where spirituality is associated with the interior life, the life of virtues, and the pursuit of perfection through their exercise. Frustrations in life and the hope for justice are neutralized by a counsel that everything will be all right, because in the end anyway, all differences will be reconciled.

Religious celebrations make people feel good and protected from the chaotic mundane world. Devotional pieties jump from the child Jesus to the crucifixion and resurrection, leaving a big lacuna on the ministry of Jesus. People like to hear what affirms their experiences but reject those that are disquieting or challenging. The Bible is read like a paradise without danger, a refuge from our present disappointments, and the stories of Jesus are interpreted as harmless cliché in which the embarrassing or painful aspects of his life vanish from our horizon.

Spiritual readings abound to purify the soul by taming the body and controlling if not denying emotions so as not to complain of hardships and pains. In moments of lament, people are taught that "God is just testing your faith." Prayer assemblies talk of a God who cares and is compassionate but divorced from social conflicts, and spiritual events focus too much on personal sins and personal salvation. And, still to a large extent in contemporary Philippine Catholicism, true holiness belongs only to the ordained and those with religious vows who are likewise perceived as the sole bearers of the truth.

The authors in this volume implicitly question this a-political holiness. At least three theological inputs from authors have bearing on a holiness of walking on the muddy earth, grimy and filthy. First, the dualistic worldview that separates the church from the world, religion from society, and faith from ideologies, must be abandoned in favor of a discipleship that is inserted and intimately linked with

humankind and its history. The call to ever communion with God and the call to ever communion with the world are intrinsically united in Christian holiness.

Second, there is a need to go beyond the divide of the sacred and secular by affirming the world in its totality as the setting where God is discovered, affirmed and praised. Humankind, with its achievements and frustrations, successes and failures, is not only the place where God reveals; it is also the place where God saves. Political engagement, thus, is constitutive of the work of salvation to which we all are called to participate.

Third, the traditionally held belief that the church exists *for* the benefit of humankind is sharpened by the idea that loving humankind takes concrete form, shape and practice in privileging the poor, the suffering, and the excluded in history. Those who claim to be living up to Christian holiness are to “dirty their hands” (Verstraeten) *with* those who are inhumanly treated in our world so that, through solidarity, they may experience God’s reign of justice.

Traversing the murky world of the marginalized in history and dominated by powerful social forces, including the Christian churches, is to stand on a precarious ground “between honesty and hope” (Edicio de la Torre). Christian social and political activists must be firm in their conviction for a just and equitable society, yet recognizing the limitations of human projects of liberation and being open to unexpected possibilities that can contribute to social transformation. Christians “on the ground,” no matter how noble their commitments are, and on behalf of the silenced and powerless, need to check their impatience, cynicism, and pessimism, and be able to work in open fields of opportunities that were previously unexplored or judged as unacceptable by ideological dogmatism.

The Christian narrative of holiness is steadfastly anchored in the dangerous memory of Jesus of Nazareth (Odchigue). Such narrative is informed and formed by the gracious God who interrupted human history by giving Jesus who embodied in words and deeds God’s reign of life, love, and justice. The coming of Jesus is an interruption on behalf of the poor, the sick, the sinners, the outcast, the disregarded, and the victims of dominant structures of power of local elites and imperial rule (see Echica). In this way, the dangerous memory of Jesus is entwined with the narratives of the

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suffering victims of our world, past and present, the living and the dead. His loud cry on the cross is not his own but the cry of the multitude of people who feel abandoned by God and by their societies.

Christianity thus is a living memory and the continuing narrative that surprises the world with the unfamiliar, and potentially subversive for a future that is radically different from the present. To “put Christ on” is to be willing and ready to dirty our feet in the world of the forsaken. Christian holiness is subversive in that it fundamentally challenges ideologies and systems that betray the hopes of the poor and victims of injustice. Christian holiness today must grant privilege to those who are constrained to celebrate the meaning of life, for it is in their sorrow that the meaning of life and the truth of God may be found with liberative message.

If Christian holiness bears the dangerous memory of Jesus and of our forsaken people, this would lead to a corresponding growth in the Christians’ understanding of faith and the practices of their Christian communities. On a personal level, holiness with feet on the muddy earth, instead of being guilty bystanders, requires a constant openness to personal transformation through an incarnate presence in politics (Verstraeten). It is necessary that Christians continually reexamine their ways of living in ongoing conversion process from a privatizing tendency of faith toward a faith in God who takes decisive action in human history in the name of justice and compassion. Their life of prayer and participation in the sacraments, and devotional festivities as well, should enable them to deepen and express the dangerous memory of Jesus and their commitment to the suffering victims in our society (Echica).

On a social level, holiness with feet on the muddy ground courageously interrogates the exploitative social, economic and political structures, together with the creation of new forms of communities with global outlook and representing the voices of the underside of history. It is a holiness that opens up history anew and that foregrounds the dreams of the injured, the overpowered, and the unknown. It is a way of living the gospel that is attentive to the requirements of justice, to the extent of supporting, joining, or forming political parties with platforms and programs that nurture and nourish a praxis that takes sides with the causes of the marginalized

sectors of society (Gonzalez). In relation to power-blocks in the church and society, the conference participants reminded one another of the biblical wisdom of acting as “cunning as a snake and gentle as a dove”.

On the ecclesial level, we need a holiness that is not afraid to critique the Christian tradition of its elements that are dogmatically unsympathetic to present-day concerns, but also as to embark on a re-visioning of this tradition in the light of Jesus’ memory and more pastorally compassionate to people. Specifically, the “unethical use of political threats by some church leaders” (Genilo) against civil and political leaders, rather than changing or producing good leaders of the land, only reinforce self-preservation, and in the process discrediting the church of its integrity to influence society with Gospel values. By launching “holy war” against individuals and groups whose views diverge from the ecclesiastical positions, the church becomes “a partisan strategist and power broker no different from other interest groups in the country seeking to influence national policy” (Genilo).

In the context of conflicting social forces, “the praxial challenge (is) to dialogue with, animate and encourage other discourses represented by different civil society organizations” (Odchigue) and to raise the awareness that there are direct correlations between the various social, political, economic, and ecological issues. But this also involves on the part of the churches “an integral way (of) a process of conversion towards an emptying and evacuation of epistemological pride” (Odchigue) and to learn from the truths offered by other social actors (Genilo).

While it is acknowledged that while the churches, particularly their leadership, have the authority to proclaim and interpret divine revelation, there is also the “magisterium of the poor, the inarticulate, and the excluded.” It is they who seek to live up to the demands of the Gospel in their everyday lives. It is they who will carry on their shoulders the church’s teachings and theologies. Will their bodies be relieved of the painful loads they carry or will they be further burdened and gasp for air in the already deadly quicksand?

The Christian witness to “political love” (Verstraeten) in the mold of the man from Nazareth will be judged not by the pastoral and academic magisterium but by those who are soaked and soiled yet

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believing in their dreams, refusing defeat and striving to rise up with dignity and courage. In the muddy earth, there are springs of water of life from which the theologians of DaKaTeo are also invited to drink. Theology, after all, is not only faith seeking understanding, but also faith seeking fuller life.

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