



An Exercise in Contextualization: Misa ng Sambayanang Pilipino Towards a Reappropriation of Ancient Filipino Spirituality

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Abstract: In the 1990s, the Philippine church submitted to the Vatican for approval the Misa ng Sambayanang Pilipino that attempted to contextualize the Roman rite and make it more Filipino. More than 30 years later, the Vatican has yet to make an official response. This article would like to argue that an indigenous Catholic liturgy, outside of the Roman Rite, should be developed instead. Like any other cultural ritual, an indigenous Catholic ritual is a natural expression of the people in recognizing the divine. It should organically flow within the customary cultural practices of the locality. Through a historical-critical analysis, this article examines existing contextualized rites in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea with the hope of inspiring Filipino Catholics to rediscover and to appreciate their ancient spiritual roots.

Key words: contextual theology, indigenized liturgy, Roman Rite, Filipino, Sacrosanctum Concilium

1. INTRODUCTION

Crafting the Misa ng Sambayanang Pilipino was the first official attempt of the Filipino clergy to contextualize the Eucharistic celebration based on the Roman Catholic Rite. This attempt was inspired by the challenge of the Vatican Council II, through the document Sacrosanctum Concilium, to make the liturgy more meaningful to Catholics across cultures and languages. The initial work began with the translation of all liturgical text from Latin to the different vernaculars in the archipelago. In the 1990s, the Philippine church submitted for approval the Misa ng Sambayanang Pilipino that included variations in the Roman Rite that attempted to contextualize the rite and make it more Filipino. More than 30 years later, the Vatican has yet to make an official response.

This article would like to argue that a proposed contextualized liturgy will most likely be rejected by the Vatican due to the inherent cultural nature of the Romans of looking at reality based on conformity, discipline. What Filipino Catholics need now is an indigenous Catholic ritual that expresses both the local culture and the gospel culture. Like any other cultural ritual, a contextualized Filipino Catholic ritual must be a natural expression of the people in recognizing a higher power or the divine. It should organically flow within the customary cultural practices of the tribe.

This article will explore the liturgies of Rabaul in Papua New Guinea, and Flores in Indonesia with the hope of giving light on the delayed approval of the Vatican.



2. ALL RITES ARE INCULTURATED

The Roman Rite itself, along with the Eastern Rites, Malabar Rite, Byzantine Rite, etc. did not get any approval from any authority because there was no curia or a central governing office to decide about it back then. They were a product of a long process of inculturation: the Gospel finding its way into the culture and customs of the locality. This is not to put down these rites but to simply illustrate a natural course of events. The guidance and presence of an elder, and the repetitions of the ritual in the community were enough to give legitimacy. In all circumstances, it is very probable that the way the liturgies evolve is because of the various adjustments that the elders and the community did to make it communicate clearly the message of love which is at the heart of the Christianity (Bevans 2002, De Mesa 1991).

The Eastern Rites are referred to as *sui iuris* or rites that could stand on their own. Due to distance, historical circumstances, cultural differences, geopolitical situations, these rites grew and developed around a leader (Pope, Patriarch, Arche patriarch). Many of these rites trace their origins from bishops that lived during the period of early Christianity. The Malabar Rite in India look to St Thomas the Apostle as the apostle that came to their land while the Catholic communities in Aleppo look to St. Ignatius of Antioch as their point of reference. Rome has a special place because of the fact that it traces itself to Peter, the leader of the Apostles and on whom the Lord has said, he will build his Church.

The liturgies or public worship rituals by themselves originated organically i.e., from the natural surroundings, daily life, hunting practices, diet, life-transition rituals, courtship and mating, etc. (Chupungco, 1982). This article would like to trace the various elements of the Filipino Rite and make some comparisons with other contextualized Catholic Rites in other countries through a historical-critical approach.

The Chinese controversy in the 1600s is certainly the model of all discourse on contextualized liturgies. The desire of the Jesuit Fr Mateo Ricci to bring the gospel through the Chinese worship of ancestors became the battleground that brought the dissolving of the Jesuits but also great glory when finally the Church recognized the validity of the initiatives after Vatican II.

3. LOOKING AT PHILIPPINE NEIGHBORS

3.1 The Flores Experience

Flores is an Indonesian island near East Timor that has an overwhelmingly Catholic population. It has been recently made famous by National Geographic for the discovery of the skeletal remains of the smallest homo sapien. Missionaries from the Society of the Divine Word and Society of Jesus have worked for decades in the area with one SVD priest being a consultant for the Vatican II document *Sancrosanctum Concilium*.

The Flores liturgy and liturgical calendar is based on the different agricultural and fishing events throughout the year. In fact Flores even has unique names for periods corresponding to the actual agricultural activity. August for instance is referred to as Beolan or the period of land preparation before planting while November is called Toben Nika or the period of planting seeds (Ujan, 2013).

The rituals involve in these agricultural and fishing events were first considered superstitious but eventually reclaimed by missionaries as legitimate liturgical moments that highlighted Gods presence in the



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most local way. Already in the 1950, Flores liturgy had offertory dances incorporated, and liturgical hymns in the local dialect. This was the initiative of SVD priest Willem Van Bekkum whose ideas would later be part of Sactrosanctum Concilium.

3.2 The Rabaul Experience

Rabaul is a town in the volcanic island of East New Britain in Papua New Guinea. This mission territory is one of last Pacific island to be evangelized. The author witnessed firsthand Rabaul's 100th anniversary of evangelization in 1993. Protestant and Catholic missionaries arrived almost at the same time and worked harmoniously with each other. The people of Rabaul are referred to as the Tolai people. The first Papua New Guinean saint was a Tolai catechist ewho killed by the Japanese for giving communion secretly to imprisoned missionaries.

The Rabaul liturgy is a festive and colorful event. The entrance hymn is preceded by a hunting dance and song accompanied by loud kundus. The dancers are elaborately painted with bright colors all over their bodies bearing at times sharpened sticks. All songs for the liturgy are in the vernacular but some are based on old German hymns. Rabaul was evangelized by Missionaries of the Sacred Heart from Germany. What is significant in the celebrations is that the entire congregation (men, women, children) sings in four voices giving the liturgy a hair-raising, heavenly-like sound.

Unlike Flores, Rabaul has no clear-cut conscious inculturation of life-events into the liturgy. What is clear is that the seemingly inculturated Catholic liturgical ritual co-exists with local rituals such as funeral, wedding, and coming-of-age rituals. In Rabaul, the transition from boyhood to adulthood is an important cultural event that may find a profound relationship with the sacrament of confirmation. Both events assumed maturity and expect responsibility from the young male. For a period of 3-6 months, the young boy would live away from his home far out in the bushes and build his own haus mangi (boys' house). He is expected not to communicate with anyone and will look after himself. At the end of that secluded period, he will be welcomed back as an adult which is usually accompanied by a celebration of the community. The young man may now also be eligible to marry.

4. THE PHILIPPINE SITUATION

In relation to Rabaul and Flores, the Philippine experience has a totally different scenario. Rabaul and Flores were evangelized in the late 1800s. Ferdinand Magellan landed in 1521 just after the Council of Trent. Spaniards had a very limited perspective on the aspects of culture. Every indigenous religious and spiritual practice was considered animistic, superstitious, and idolatrous depriving Filipinos of their natural way of communicating with the divine. Kapampangan scholars have recently discovered a local practice called "mag-anito" which means giving food offering to gods or spirits for good luck, healing or for any other need. Jocano and De Mesa have noted the penchant of Filipinos to say "tabi-tabi po" when entering a seemingly deserted place to give due respect to the unseen spirits that may be dwelling in the vicinity. Mercado interprets this behavior as Filipinos' understanding of the divine as something imminent and tangible. He extends this interpretation to the habit of wiping sacred images with handkerchief which would in turn be wiped on the sick body parts of devotees. Touching the Nazareno or at least the rope that pulls the "andas" is a prime objective of the Black Nazarene procession participants which they believe would bring them into direct contact with the divine.

Elements of rice planting and harvesting never seem to have their way in the liturgy except for the



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Pahiyas festival in Lucban, Quezon. Offerings for the mass seldom include local produce. What we usually see are apples and oranges. If only The Misa ng Sambayanang Pilipino in fact emphasizes “pagmamano” or respect for elders, and the children being fed first before the adults emphasizing a loving parental image more than a patriarchal or matriarchal image.

Jocano’s interpretation on the Filipino creation story is very interesting. She found the oldest account from a 15th century Spanish friar source that goes like this: the water and the sky were at war; in order for the sky to beat the water, it created patches of land to limit the spaces of the water; from these patches of land grew a bamboo tree; a bird peck on the bamboo that split it open revealing a man (laki) and a woman (bayi); the spirits gave permission for them to marry because although they were siblings, there were no other people in the land;

Jocano (1998) noticed that in this creation myth, recorded by the conquistadores themselves, ancient Filipinos valued marriage as a legitimate ritual for union of a man and a woman. In addition, they did not want siblings to marry for that would be incest. Our ancestors respected spirit/s from they asked for permission or advise. This reveals a very complicated and advanced culture contrary to the often repeated description of early Filipinos as barbaric or animal-like.

Spirituality, broadly defined, refers to the consciousness of the divine or something greater than the person. What Jocano found out were traces of ancient Filipino spirituality which were also affirmed by Mercado (2001), a SVD Filipino missionary and philosopher. Their viewpoints point towards a reclaiming of our deep and ancient religious roots instead of negatively referring to these as dark moments of our history or as episodes of idolatry and paganism. Even in pastoral theology, the seeming convergence of local spirituality with Christianity is pejoratively called popular religiosity.

I think these insights and reflections from ancient myths would make a richer appreciation of an inculturated liturgy that reveals the presence of God right into our ancient rituals and practices. I think ecclesiastics should start reconsidering the natural indigenous awe at good spirits and deep seated fear towards evil spirits as part of the reflection in crafting an authentic contextualized liturgy.

5. THE VATICAN POSITION

Despite the outright call of Vatican II to renew the liturgy, the Vatican Curia on the other hand has exercised its function with an iron grip hand that seems to belong to the pre-Vatican II era. The Congregation for Worship, the Vatican office handling liturgical affairs, has only one mission: to remain faithful to the Roman Rite whatever it takes. Like any other civil constitution, Sacrosanctum Concilium needed an implementing guideline for it to materialize.

It was only in 1994 that a document aptly titled Instruction: Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy was released by the congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Despite declaring at the onset that there is no desire for rigid uniformity on non-essentials, reading the entire document is akin to riding a roller coaster that brings one to heights of excitement of progress and development in the area of inculturation then suddenly brings you disappointingly down to its real goal of keeping the Roman Rite intact. Just when the document would begin to sound very optimistic on inculturation and adaptation, the same document would douse water into flames of liturgical enthusiasm emphasizing faithfulness to doctrine, preservation of unity, and avoidance of superstition. I absolutely understand this position given the enormous responsibility of this office of keeping the Catholic identity one and whole. I think inculturation should happen



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outside the Roman Rite.

This desire for the preservation of tradition and identify can of course become an obsession that may negatively lead to fundamentalism. In 2013, Pope Benedict VI approved the reversal of the English translations of the Latin Roman Rite from an English dynamic equivalence translation to a literal but “faithful” translation. Thus when the priest say “The Lord be with you”, we reply with “And with your spirit”, instead of “And also with you”. Some critics believed that Pope Benedict was forced by the conservative block among the curia forcing him to resign a year later due to the controversy.

The Opus Dei and Pope Pius X groups in the Philippines have also been vocal in objecting to any form of contextualization in the liturgy. In fact, they have reverted back to the Latin form of the Mass or what is now called as the extra-ordinary form of the Mass.

6. CONCLUSION

A liturgy is a public worship expressing faith, love, gratitude, and hope. It is communicated in a language that the group speaks, in traditions that the tribe observes, and in rituals that individuals undergo as they move on in life or when making major decisions. It may also be a sad day as when we gather in the wake of loved one. It may include dances, music, a lot of talking, food and drinks but is above all a celebration of life. Whatever it is, this liturgy speaks to a specific group of people thus there is no absolute need for an authority to make judgments on the appropriateness or faithfulness of this or that liturgy to Christianity because God has been working in that culture even before Christianity came.

Hence, the best move forward is to let the Roman Rite remain as it is and allow instead the development or rediscovery of authentic Filipino prayer services/rituals. The participation of anthropologists and historians would be very necessary in this project because it will require unearthing what used to be taboo among Filipino Catholics such as superstitions, animistic rituals, etc. A new way of looking at this aspect of our culture will certainly give a new impetus towards a contextualize Christian and Catholic worship that does no harm at all to the Roman Rite or to Catholicism in general.

The reflection will now focus on finding Christian elements and values in the local culture without having to worry about keeping the decorum required of the Roman Rite. The situation is more like “inserting” Christian elements into the indigenous liturgy/prayer instead of the local culture forcing its tribal dances and songs into a Roman culture that by its very nature cannot sincerely accommodate or adapt even if it wanted to.

In contrast with what the editors of the proceedings of the 2nd Plenary Council fo the Philippines that described pre-Hispanic Philippines as clothed in darkness (apparently referring to animistic rituals and superstitious beliefs), the Philippines is, with all that we now know, actually a very spiritual country with a very spiritually conscious population.

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