



Shared Catholicism in Southeast Asia: Overseas Filipino Prayer Groups and the Charismatic Spaces in Singapore, An Ethnohistorical Analysis

Mark Inigo M. Tallara
Assistant Professor, International Studies Department
De La Salle University, Manila
Email: mark.inigo.tallara@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: This paper is about Catholicism in Southeast Asia, highlighting the overseas Filipino Catholic Charismatic prayer groups. The discussion focuses on El Shaddai Prayer Movement, popularly known as El Shaddai; and the Light of Jesus or LOJ's Sunday groups in Singapore. Although the Sunday *Gawain* also known as Family Appointment of El Shaddai and LOJ's Sunday Feast are central to the arguments of this paper, the discussion takes a broader consideration of how Singapore become shared spaces for religious practices. The discussion engages the idea of place and space in the study of religion. Shared spaces in this paper means: (1) how Singaporean Catholics are sharing spaces with El Shaddai and LOJ members; and (2) how the members are re-imagining their Filipino culture and traditions in shared places and spaces. By using oral accounts and documents from El Shaddai and LOJ members, preachers, and council members in Singapore, this paper offers an ethnohistorical analysis of overseas Filipino's charismatic way of worship focusing on the Sunday *Gawain* and The Feast. The analysis relies on three connected questions: (1) How El Shaddai and LOJ prayer groups in Singapore act like a sociocultural meeting space? (2) How the group's Sunday activities intensify joy and confront suffering? (3) How do the members make homes and cross boundaries?

Key Words: Catholicism; Charismatic Movements; Overseas Filipinos; El Shaddai Prayer Movement; Light of Jesus Movement

1. INTRODUCTION

Charismatic way of worship is a growing movement in the Catholic Church. In 2018, the movement¹ celebrated its 50 years in the Philippines. While

many of the charismatic groups offer religious formation but they have different methods and emphasis on the content particularly to that of the Catholic teachings and practices. The ability to persuade is one of the most important signs of a charismatic person but this ability is not exclusively to an individual but also to a group. At the very center of this ability is the idea of "charisma" which involves the power to hold someone or hold a community. Max Weber distinguishes charismatic to bureaucratic authority's ability to reorganize "from

¹ The Philippine Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services or PhilCCRS, the Federation of Transparochial Charismatic Communities or FTCC, with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCRM) of the Archdiocese of Manila organized a unified celebration to highlight this milestone in 2018.



without" which means imposing new laws for social orders while the charismatic has the ability to reorganize "from within" that followers embody change "according to the will of the authority." (Weber, 1978, p. 1116). The Weberian idea of charismatic focuses on the individual who hold it, thus attributing the quality only to a single individual which is not the focus of this paper, the discussion focuses on the community or groups as charismatic. For Thomas Csordas, an alternative view of charisma is not only defined by "personal magnetism," but by the performative acts like rituals and other activities that produces a space for charismatic action and language (Csordas, 1997, p. 133). In this paper, the term "charismatic" is used as a designation given to shared spaces and the identity of the members of El Shaddai and LOJ in Singapore. While the Catholic elements of worship are present in both prayer groups, the term "charismatic" is also a label on how they are performing their religious practices which emphasizes on the role, gifts, charisms, and experience of the Holy Spirit.

In this study of El Shaddai and LOJ's overseas chapters, the interview materials particularly the oral accounts from the different people involved in the different activities in the Philippines and Singapore were used as the primary sources. In Singapore, my initial field visit took place in April 2018 and the data collection was undertaken in the months of May to September of the same year. News articles about El Shaddai and LOJ particularly from the Catholic newsletters in the Philippines and Singapore were also used to write an introductory historical analysis of the overseas prayer groups. The researcher also considers Leonardo Mercado's *El Shaddai: A Study* published in 2001, one of the earliest book on the history of El Shaddai in the Philippines. Another important study is Katharine Wiegale book's *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* published in 2004. Although the works of Mercado and Wiegale are still considered the most comprehensive books about the growth and development of charismatic groups in the Philippines, the authors provided no details about the groups' overseas chapters which is the focus of this paper. There are no existing historical accounts about the El Shaddai and LOJ's chapters in

Singapore. The two group's communication ministries published some kind of articles intended for publicising their activities like their anniversary celebration in a local Catholic newsletters. The researcher made used of these articles as important sources for writing the history of the El Shaddai and LOJ's chapters in Singapore.

The discussion on the historical development of El Shaddai and LOJ focuses on the growth of their overseas chapters, highlighting how Singapore became shared spaces for performing religious activities. The main argument is that El Shaddai and LOJ's spaces exists both within and outside the physical structure of the Catholic Church. For many overseas Filipinos, Catholic churches offers a safe space for their religious activities and bounded place for their social gatherings. The church's hospitality like for example in Singapore, the Blessed Sacrament Church's Damien Centre is a regular venue for El Shaddai's activities. The Singapore Expo and Convention Centre's rented spaces or halls are used as the official Sunday venue for LOJ's The Feast or Sunday praise and worship including the celebration of the Catholic Mass. While these spaces serve as an extension of the church, they become temporary sacred spaces. Thus, the religious practices of El Shaddai and LOJ members takes place in a religious space created by the interplay of the institutional, individual, and collective way of performing their Catholic charismatics religious practices.

In Singapore, the activities of El Shaddai and LOJ is providing the members a sense of togetherness. This small groups play a key role in the recruitment of new members and spaces for social interaction. The religious activities particularly during Sundays includes attending the mass, the *Gawain*² of El Shaddai and The Feast³ for LOJ,

² *Gawain* is a Tagalog word for activities. Also known as El Shaddai's weekly praise and worship. In Singapore, the weekly praise and worship is known as Family Appointment. The elements of how to pray-and-get-rich 'prosperity gospel' of the *Gawain* as well as the group's openness to the elements of Filipino religiosity gives El Shaddai an advantage of accepting the idea of inculturation over to other more structured religious groups.

³ The Feast is a prayer gathering of the members of the Light of Jesus or LOJ. Every week, LOJ members gather for Sunday mass which is followed by a talk given by Feast



members are also praying the rosary. These Catholic practices combined with typical charismatic way of worship linked El Shaddai and LOJ more to their fellow Catholics than to other charismatic Pentecostal-style prayer groups. Although most members are limiting their contacts only to the group, they also welcome Singaporean Catholics to their religious activities. El Shaddai and LOJ in Singapore has created a transparochial and transnational Catholic charismatic prayer movement. This ability of El Shaddai and LOJ of crossing territorial and religious boundaries comes not just from its charismatic status but from its shared identity with other new Catholic lay religious movements.

The study of place and space in religious studies is still evolving. It is also the aim of this paper to contribute to the conceptual discussion and methodological approach to the study of religion in place and space. Kim Knott⁴ proposed a methodology for locating religion in places, things, communities, and objects. Like Knott, this study also considers the ideas of Lefebvre (1991), Foucault (1986), and De Certeau (1984) on space, knowledge, and power to produce a series of steps to analyze the location of religion. For Thomas A. Tweed, religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows, moving through time and space, that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supra-human forces, to make homes and to cross boundaries (Tweed, 2006, p. 5). By applying Tweed's idea of religions, the discussion explores how El Shaddai and LOJ activities incorporates what he suggests as the metaphors of biological and cultural clock to organic-cultural flows involved in the religious practices in

Builders. It is also through the Feast that LOJ members participate in other activities. There are now over 150 Feasts in the Philippines and in key areas in Asia, North America, Middle East, Europe, and Oceania, details available at: <https://www.feast.ph> (accessed 11 March 2020).
⁴ The discussion on Kim Knott (2005 and 2010) on spatial theory and method for the study of religion, see *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*. "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion." *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 41 (2) (2005), pp. 153–84. See also "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion." *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 1 (2010), pp. 29–43.

place and space (Tweed, 2006). The discussion argues that 'as confluences of organic-cultural flows', El Shaddai and LOJ prayer groups particularly joining the *Gawain* and The Feast in Singapore, members are able to confront their problems and sufferings. The singing and dancing intensify their inner joy and happiness. El Shaddai and LOJ members also able "to make homes" through the different after the Sunday activities like celebrating birthdays and group anniversaries.

2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is both historical and ethnographic. The main approach of this study is ethnohistorical, similar to other scholars such as Wiegele (2005) and Cannell (1999) which focuses on how contemporary interview data used in connection to global historical processes. What are the origins of Filipino overseas charismatic prayer movement? What are the motivations of the members of the El Shaddai and LOJ and how their religious practices changed in Singapore? These were the main methodological questions for data gathering. Aside from field observation, the researcher also participated in the actual activities to uncover the member's motivation.

The researcher spent more than two years of fieldwork in the Philippines and Singapore. The researcher conducted library research and semi-structured interviews of El Shaddai and LOJ members in Singapore. Although there are other churches for weekday *Gawain*, the Singapore chapter's main church and Sunday *Gawain* is held at the Blessed Sacrament Church, located at 1 Commonwealth Drive. LOJ's The Feast are held every Sunday at SUNTEC City Convention Centre's Room 311 and at Singapore Expo and Convention Centre's Halls G and H.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The process of creating charismatic space involves the production of place (Oosterbaan, 2009, pp. 81–104). Place plays an indispensable role as gathering space mechanism (Casey, 1996. p. 25). As mentioned in the introduction, the idea and location of place and space in the study of religion is still evolving. Some of the earliest scholarship on the subject was generally limited to certain topics such as sacred space and



pilgrimage like for example in the works of Gerard van der Leeuw (1932); Mircea Eliade (1957; 1959; 1961); Jonathan Z. Smith (1978; 1992); and Victor and Edith Turner (1978). The study of place and space can also be found in the works of Michel de Certeau (1984); Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Michel Foucault (1986; 1991). In the works of De Certeau, Lefebvre, and Foucault they recognized the authority and power of religious institutions as well as the discourses on the historical production and shaping of place and space (Knott 2008; 2010). Space is not an empty container but also an arena of struggle (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 417; Foucault, 1991; Knott, 2008, p. 1110). Whether for religious purpose or secular activities, without a space to produce and shape, ideas and beliefs as well as principles and values will remain ephemeral, ungrounded, and unorganized (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 417; Knott, 2008, p. 1110).

Singapore continued to be one of the most popular destinations for Filipinos to live and work. Filipino domestic helpers comprises the largest job percentage but there are increasing numbers of Filipinos who are working in the other sectors like customer service as well as engineers, architects, and even teachers. In Singapore, the number of Filipinos as of 2017 is about 121,900⁵. Besides geographically close to the Philippines and better job opportunities, Singapore is an ideal places for migrant Filipinos based on the local government's openness to different religions and religious freedom. Religious tolerance and freedom allow many Filipinos to gather regularly for their religious activities which is the same freedom or rights enjoyed by Singaporeans.

3.1 Charismatic in Filipino Catholicism: Understanding El Shaddai's *Gawain* and LOJ's The Feast

When did charismatic groups start in the Philippines? The growth of Catholic charismatic

movement is closely associated to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Known also as Vatican II, this ecumenical council is credited for shaping the modern Catholic Church and opening new ways of expressing the Catholic religious practices. Although historically, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal or CCR began in the U.S. in 1967, the Vatican II's document *Lumen Gentium* set aside specific discussion on the role and identity of the lay members of the church. A lay person is a member of the church who "seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God" (*Lumen Gentium* 31). This mandate of Vatican II is influential to the growth and development of lay-driven CCR and other prayer movements.

There is no official record of the year or date when the charismatic groups started in the Philippines. But in the mid-1980s there were groups already held series of gatherings. The biggest group that time and until today is El Shaddai but the other pioneering groups were the Light of Jesus, Loved Flock, Oasis of Love, Ligaya ng Panginoon, Lord's Flock, and Bukas Loob sa Diyos. Just like most of the charismatic groups, El Shaddai and LOJ are prayer movements that characterized by joyful singing during their prayer gatherings and the celebration of the mass. Members are free to raise their hands in prayer and during songs. The general acceptance of the Catholic Church to these groups is positive and from a theological point of view, some Filipino priests and theologians see them as a movement inspired by the Holy Spirit.

For El Shaddai and LOJ members in Singapore, it is the emotional aspect of Filipino religiosity that find these charismatic elements very attractive to them. Anyone who has attended the activities of El Shaddai and LOJ understands that in many ways, the singing, dancing, and other social activities, holds the whole thing together. Attending the Sunday *Gawain* and The Feast in Singapore for example, the music's energy and the cultural embeddedness and appropriateness of the songs and other activities has attracted many migrant Filipinos to join the El Shaddai's *Gawain* and LOJ's The Feast.

The main teachings of El Shaddai focuses on "personal transformation." El Shaddai's teachings to some extent are similar with the formative and

⁵ Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are estimated at 2.3 million based from the 2017 survey on overseas Filipinos from the period 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2017. Based on the distribution of OFWs by place of work, Singapore has 5.3 per cent (or 121, 900 thousand Filipinos). See complete details in *2017 Survey on Overseas Filipinos*. Manila: Philippine Statistics Authority, published on 18 May 2018.



doctrinal dimension of CCR which emphasizes on the positive aspects of religiosity. LOJ held their first prayer meeting at the Sanchez home in Quezon City on 9 September 1980. The following year, 30 regular attendees of the prayer meetings formed the Core Family of what was then called Light of Jesus Community. LOJ has also supported various ministries of Brother Bo Sanchez such as the Shepherd's Voice Publications, Radio and Television and his online inspirational shows. By the early 2000s, Brother Bo established the Feast, a Sunday prayer gathering with Holy Mass, lively worship, and series of talks on practical Christian Living.

For Katharine Wiegele, like many prosperity movements, El Shaddai and LOJ amounts to a sort of democratization of Catholicism in the Philippines. The movement have adopted several evangelical concepts and Pentecostal experiences such as baptism in the spirit and physical healing (Wiegele, 2005). The *Gawain* and The Feast incorporates the elements of how to pray-and-get-rich "prosperity gospel" with that of more traditional Catholic practices. And perhaps the most popular practice is holding up the white handkerchiefs and bankbooks.

3.2 Shared Catholic Spaces: Sharing in El Shaddai's *Gawain* and LOJ's The Feast

Longing for home is another factor why Filipinos in Singapore are motivated to join the El Shaddai and LOJ activities. Attending the actual activities, to be seated together with my respondents, helped me understand how they see themselves as members. This opportunity also provided me a glimpse into their situations in Singapore. The familiar language and similar experience of the Catholic rituals and practices especially during the mass and other religious activities comfort many Filipino members of El Shaddai and LOJ. For Hagan and Ebaugh, to spend a day inside the church⁶ and to attend the different activities, for many migrants acts as a source of support for their hardships or unfortunate

situations (Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003, p. 1159). Attending the *Gawain*, The Feast, and other activities provides El Shaddai and LOJ members not just a sense of security and being at home as members are surrounded by its familiarity. They enter into a place where the smell, sounds, and objects give them a nostalgic feel of being at home. Inside a familiar space like the church and their interactions with fellow Filipinos are also creating some kind of renewed meaning of being away from their family and their goals to why they are working abroad.

The Sunday *Gawain* or The Feast becomes a powerful religious tool and personal strategy for El Shaddai and LOJ members in Singapore. It becomes an integral part of their lives, an activity that can be done during their off-day. The Sunday activities also offers the opportunity to vent out their frustrations and relieve their stress, especially those related to their works. Turning to *Gawain* or attending The Feast activities offers them a space where they can openly express themselves, something they might not be able to do in front of other religious organizations.

4. CONCLUSION (tentative)

The charismatic way of worship is a growing movement in the Catholic Church. Through songs, personal testimonies, healing, and the unconventional way of preaching, El Shaddai and LOJ are providing spiritual help as well as introducing an alternative form of expressing the Catholic religious practices. El Shaddai and LOJ's effective overseas ministry is one key characteristic of the group's successful expansion and existence in Singapore. The group also foster a sense of community by reaching out to Filipinos. They are providing a familiar space, very similar to home for social interaction. El Shaddai and LOJ are also seen as a shelter, a place where one can feel safe and happy. Aside from providing social space, charismatic prayer groups also answering the spiritual needs of overseas Filipinos. During *Gawain* or attending The Feast, members can perform freely their religious practices very similar to their own cultural background.

⁶ See Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Rose Ebaugh's "Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the Migration Process." *International Migration Review* 37 (4), (2003): 1145-1162.



5. REFERENCES

- Anderson, A. (2014). *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2013). *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Csordas, T. (1997). *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Enriquez, V. (1986). "Kapwa: A Core Concept in Filipino Social Psychology." In *Philippine World View*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Francisco, J. (2010). "Mapping Religious and Civil Spaces in Traditional and Charismatic Christianities in the Philippines." *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 1/2, Festschrift in honor of Fr. John N. Schumacher, S.J., pp. 185-221.
- Foucault, M. (1991). "Space, Knowledge, and Power." In *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, edited by P. Rabinow. London: Penguin.
- Hagan, J. and Ebaugh, H. (2003). "Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the Migration Process." *International Migration Review* 37 (4).
- Knott, K. (2008). "Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion." *Religion Compass* 2 (6), pp. 1102-16.
- . (2010). "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* (1), pp. 29-43.
- Kong, L. (2004) "Religious Landscape." In *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, edited by Duncan, J., Johnson, N. & Schein, R. Blackwell: Malden.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Massey, D. (1993). "Politics and Space/Time." In *Place and the Politics of Identity*, edited by M. Keith and S. Pile. London: Routledge.
- Mercado, L. (2001). *El Shaddai: A Study*. Manila: Logos Publications, Inc.
- Mulder, N. (1992) *Inside Southeast Asia: Thai, Javanese and Filipino Interpretations of Everyday Life*. Bangkok: D.K. Book House.
- Oosterbaan, M. (2009). "Sonic Supremacy: Sound, Space and Charisma in a Favela in Rio de Janeiro," *Critique of Anthropology* 29.1.
- Smith, P. (2000). "Culture and Charisma: Outline of a Theory." *Acta Sociologica* 43, p 2.
- Thorsen, J. (2015). *Charismatic Practice and Catholic Parish Life: The Incipient Pentecostalization of the Church in Guatemala and Latin America*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tweed, T. (2006). *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wiegele, K. (2005). *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.