

In God's image

Filipinos take their religious images very seriously. Recently, a local artist's exhibited work provoked intense public outrage because it affixed objects like Mickey Mouse ears and condoms to images of Christ. The artist faced lawsuits and death threats for causing offense to religious sensibilities. It seemed ironic, however, that the same level of outrage had not been directed against existing unjust and inhuman conditions in Philippine society. Respect and reverence for holy images have not led to greater concern for vulnerable people who are created in the image and likeness of God. This discrepancy may be due to the way popular devotions have been traditionally presented, with more emphasis on individual salvation than on social concern. Let me give other examples.

The oldest Christian image in the country is a statue of the Holy Child, the Santo Niño de Cebu. On its feast day, images of the Santo Niño are paraded in the streets by ardent devotees. In contrast to the attention given to the Holy Child, the country still fails to meet international standards for the protection of children, especially from sex trafficking. According to UNICEF there are approximately 60,000 to 600,000 victims of child prostitution in the country. The Philippines ranks fourth among countries with the most number of prostituted children.

One of the most popular Marian devotions in the country is the novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help. Its national shrine draws thousands of pilgrims. A striking contrast to this devotion to Mary is the situation of women in the country. According to Amnesty International, domestic violence remains pervasive in the country despite the existence of laws that prohibit and penalize violence against women.

The image of the Black Nazarene, a dark wooden statue of Christ carrying his cross, draws hundreds of men to walk barefoot and accompany the image through the streets of Manila during its feast day. Despite a strong devotion to the suffering Christ, Filipinos have not been able to stop the suffering of victims of human rights violations in the country. The 2010 Human Rights Report of Amnesty International enumerate arbitrary killings, secret detention, torture, and forced displacement of indigenous peoples as among the human rights violations resulting from armed conflicts between the military and local insurgents.

Catholic social teachings seek to overcome this disconnection between popular religiosity and social realities. *Evangelium Nuntiandi* recognizes popular religiosity as a potent means of evangelization and *Justice in the World* reminds us of the essential relationship between evangelization and "action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world." The Church's current efforts toward renewed evangelization in the Philippines presents a timely opportunity to harness

the power of popular devotions to move people to express their love for God and to channel this power into expressions of love for neighbor through the building of a more just and humane society.

The first letter of John raises the question, "If we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?" As the feast of the Christmas draws near, we are reminded of our God who chose to become human and dwell among us. May we always seek to see and love God in every person, especially those who are most weak and vulnerable.

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