



## Being Enriched by Our Indigenous Wellspring

### ABSTRACT

*How do we meaningfully celebrate 500 years of Christian faith in the Philippines given our unique historical precedents and context symbolized by the “cross” and the “sword”? This paper places the discourse within the historical, cultural and political milieu of the often marginalized and displaced Filipino Indigenous Peoples. Notwithstanding the manifold and longstanding challenges the Church faces in her attempt to inculturate and be in dialogue with the indigenous peoples, this paper proposes that we drink from our own indigenous wellspring so that we may have a better appreciation and meaningful celebration of not just our Christian faith, but our indigenous identity as well.*

Keywords: 500 Years of Christianity, indigenous wellspring, dialogue, IP (Indigenous People) ministry, mission

### WHEN CHRISTIANITY REACHED PHILIPPINES

In his seminal book *World's Apart, An Explorer's Life*, Robin Hanbury-Tenison summarized the history of the Embera Choco Indians who live in forests that traverse between Panama and Colombia in Latin America:



*(They)... lived as far as they could from the coast, far up the little hidden tributaries, where no settlers penetrated, where they could hunt and fish and grow a few crops without having put upon by black or white outsiders. They are a gentle people...who have survived by never fighting back but instead choosing to melt into the jungle, friendly to them, unfriendly to those who do not understand it. Quite possibly the first mainland Indians seen by visitors from the old world, for Columbus sighted the Darien isthmus on his last voyage. They have resisted change for nearly 500 years.*

*First came the Conquistadores, carrying the gold looted from Peru from one coast to the other through the swamps and over the mountains. Then the pirates who preyed on them, ambushing and fighting on land in the bays and open seas around the coast. Later black slaves from Africa were brought to dig for gold in the hills and work plantations of sugarcane and coffee. When they escaped and in time were freed to settle the river estuaries, the Chocos moved back into the interior.*

*Later still men came to dig the Panama Canal and great ships moved from ocean to ocean, cities grew and fishing fleets tapped the rich offshore shoals to feed them. Through the centuries, while slavers hunted their bodies, missionaries their souls. The Choco retreated a little further, protected by the inhospitable jungle and the malarial swamps.<sup>1</sup>*

This might as well be a summary of the history of our Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines, and particularly in Mindanao. Before the dawn of the conquest era, they followed the lifeways of their ancestors, living mostly in peaceful co-existence with the world around them. However, major changes took place

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<sup>1</sup>Robin Hanbury-Tenison, *World's Apart, An Explorer's Life* (London: Arrow Books, 1984), 199-200.

in the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18th centuries, when Spanish *conquistadores* and *frailes* – who were all colonizers on a mission on behalf of their monarchy – occupied their ancestral territories.

As Spain's occupation was taken over by the Americans, the changes became even more disruptive of the indigenous lifeworld especially in Mindanao. As plantations were opened up and homestead programs promoted, migrants from the north further displaced the aboriginal peoples. Hunting their bodies (by those who would exploit their land and labor) and souls (by missionaries who believed that God sent them to heathens to save them from damnation) became the pattern of power-relations between those who came from the outside and the local population of Moro and Lumad peoples.

To trace how this colonization process began, we need to return to the historical narratives of how our ancestors were coerced into subservience to foreign powers five hundred years ago. On the 16th of March 1521, the first Spanish expedition headed by Fernando Magallanes (aka Ferdinand Magellan) reached our shores.

With this entry in his journal, Pigafetta – who accompanied Magallanes – recorded what took place that fateful day:

*Saturday, the 16th of March, 1521, we arrived at daybreak in sight of a high island, three hundred leagues distant from the before-mentioned Thieves' island. This isle is named Zamal. The next day the captain-general wished to land at another uninhabited island near the first, to be in greater security and to take water, also to repose there a few days. He set up there two tents on shore for the sick, and had a sow killed for them.*

*Monday, the 18th of March, after dinner, we saw a boat come towards us with nine men in it: upon which the captain-general ordered that no one should move or speak without his permission. When these people had come into this island towards us, immediately the principal one amongst them went towards the captain-*

*general with demonstrations of being very joyous at our arrival. Five of the most showy of them remained with us, the others who remained with the boat went to call some men who were fishing, and afterwards all of them came together. The captain seeing that these people were reasonable, ordered food and drink to be given them, and he gave them some red caps, looking glasses, combs, bells, ivory, and other things. When these people saw the politeness of the captain, they presented some fish, and a vessel of palm wine.<sup>2</sup>*

But Magellan's exploration ended tragically with his death in the hands of Lapu-Lapu, leading to the failure of his expedition. There were a few more attempts to colonize the islands after Magellan but did not succeed. It took four more decades before Miguel Lopez de Legazpi succeeded in establishing Spain's foothold in the islands. From 1565 until 1898 – a long period of more than three centuries – *las Islas Filipinas* was Spain's main colony in Asia.

Within this period, the Roman Catholic Church was not only established across the country – except in areas that could not be penetrated by the Spanish forces especially the hinterlands where indigenous people resided and Muslim Mindanao – but got entrenched.

## CELEBRATING THE 500<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF CHRISTIANITY MEANINGFULLY

Today, the Philippines is an Asian country having the highest percentage of Roman Catholics, with 89% of the total population indicating that they are Catholics by religious affiliation. As we prepare to launch all kinds of celebrations for the 500th

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<sup>2</sup>"Pigafetta's Account of Magellan's Voyage" in *The First Voyage Round the World by Magellan*, with Notes and Introduction by Lord Sanley of Alderly (London: The Hakuyut Society, 1874), 163-164. See [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_First\\_Voyage\\_Round\\_the\\_World/Pigafetta%27s\\_Account\\_of\\_Magellan%27s\\_Voyage](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_First_Voyage_Round_the_World/Pigafetta%27s_Account_of_Magellan%27s_Voyage) (accessed 22 October 2019).

anniversary of the arrival of Catholicism in the Philippines, it is an opportune time to reflect on these questions:

- What kind of evangelization took place that interfaced with a colonization process? What kind of Catholicism was established in the country? What sort of Catholic religion was introduced in terms of doctrine, tenets and practices?
- What factors contributed to the success of their conversion schemes?
- If there was any form of resistance, how did they handle the people's attempt at resisting the introduction of the new religious system? Was force or even violent means employed? If so, what were these and who were the main victims?
- How did Muslim Filipinos (Tausogs, Maguindanao, Maranaw, Iranun, Kalagan et al.) managed to hold on to their Islamic faith?
- Whatever happened eventually to the non-Islamized indigenous people's belief system?
- In fact, what kind of "Christianity or Roman Catholicism" is practiced by most Filipinos today as a result of the evangelization process that begun during the Spanish era? What have been some of opinions shared by a number of social scientists and theologians regarding the kind of Christian faith predominant among Filipinos today?

One can already tell that in the months moving towards March 2021, Filipinos will be subjected to a barrage of information and propaganda detailing the significance of what took place half-a-millennium ago. It is to be expected that the dominant interpretation of its significance will be romanticized. There will be jubilant celebrations all across the land. Church and State will compete in making sure no stone is left unturned in order to make sure that the celebrations will be grand. Emphasis will naturally be in highlighting the positive, the favorable and the cause for joy.

The positive significance of this historical moment cannot be underestimated, of course. However, one hopes we can be a bit more circumspect about the manner that Christianity – specifically Hispanic Catholicism as practiced in the Iberian Peninsula in the 1500s – was introduced to our indigenous ancestors. In this way, we will gain important insights to better understand the repercussions of the colonization–evangelization project on the Filipino people, then and now. For this to happen, we need to surface and popularize a more comprehensive rereading of this historical moment from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Filipino theologians can and should participate in this task.

While there are various themes that could be pursued by Filipino theologians that deal with various aspects of the quincentenary, *mission* might be one of the most important themes to explore. There are various reasons for this choice. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines has declared 2021 as the Year of Mission (following 2020’s Year of Interfaith Dialogue, Indigenous People and Ecumenism). While there were other important reasons that pushed the Spanish Empire to send colonizers to Asia, the Church’s missionary desire to proselytize in order to convert “pagans” was a driving force necessitating the accompaniment of religious friars along the *Patronato Real* contract.

Thus, it can be said that the first Catholics baptized in what is now the Philippines were Indigenous Peoples (although their descendants now in Cebu are no longer considered IPs). Certainly, this is also true for those who were first baptized in Mindanao: the Lumads evangelized by the friars in the Caraga region. By the time the Spaniards were forced to give up their colonial hold of these islands, most of the Filipinos in the Visayas and Luzon (except upland territories in the North, Mindanao and Palawan) had become Catholics.

Today, despite the inroads of Protestant churches, the Catholic population has remained steady at 89% of the total population. Those who never converted to Catholicism were

the Moro people (mostly in the south) and IPs who remained in the uplands. Today, data from both the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) estimate the IP population – constituted by 110 ethno-linguistic groups – as between 10 to 20% of total population. In 2018 when the country’s population was approaching 103 million, IP population was estimated at 14 to 17 million. Of these, 33% are in Northern Luzon especially the Cordillera Administrative Region, 61% in Mindanao, and the rest in the Visayas area.

With the theme of mission Filipino theologians are encouraged to explore various theological angles surrounding the historical moment of the coming of Christianity as well as the missiological challenges faced by Filipino Catholics today. While it is true that IP populations are not in all the dioceses across the country, the residues of our ancestors’ belief system remain deeply embedded in the psyche of most Filipinos. This is especially true in terms of the rural-agricultural mindset that have remained strong in areas outside the urban centers. On the other hand, there are still quite a number of dioceses who have to contend with the challenge of facilitating either an inter-religious dialogue with IPs who hold on to their indigenous belief system or inculturation among those who have embraced the lowlanders’ ways.

There are a number of theological fields that can be explored in this field of interest including a number of discourses that demand their respective questions to be pursued:

- *Theological Method.* What process can be undertaken by Filipino theologians interested in deepening theological insights that can lead to a better understanding the Filipino psyche that is still heavily influenced by the residue of indigenous beliefs and practices? In the same manner, how can a Filipino theologian who is already alienated from his indigenous roots be able to dig into the roots of IP cosmology, worldview and spirituality

which can have practical value both to students of theology as well as the IP people themselves who are searching for ways to interface their Catholic faith with that of their indigenous beliefs? What tools from various disciplines (especially history, anthropology, semiotics, folk literature and the like) can be tapped as resources for these theologizing processes?

- *Theological Anthropology*. In a context where the indigenous peoples have developed a level of understanding of who they are in terms of their identities, the specificities of their cultures and their desire and struggles to hold on to these legacies, how can theology serve to deepen their moves towards self-determination? How can theology at the ground level be a force that can reinforce their agency to use various means of defending their rights (from State laws passed to their own customary laws)? In the face of a reality where those who represent institutions and agencies persist in victimizing them (State agencies, military, corporate firms, politicians – who are perceived to be “Christians”) how could Christianity be good news to them?
- *Ethics*. In a situation where IPs are caught between the armed forces of the right and the left, how will theological ethics provide a critique of the manner that the State’s neoliberalist perspective has led to a continuing insurgency while counter-insurgency campaigns has led to their constant displacements and insecurity? Can there be a theological articulation of the Church that can bring peace to the uplands? How can the IP perspective that has a strong ecological bent – given that IPs are much more able to consider the sacredness of the earth & respect creation – influence our theology of creation in a more pragmatic manner?



- *Church and Sacraments.* For most Filipinos who are Catholic lowlanders, there are still residues of our attempts to combine elements of our indigenous belief system and our Catholic upbringing and thus the theology of inculturation remains a major challenge. This is especially true in the manner that we administer sacraments and conduct liturgical celebrations. While clearly, through the centuries, there has been a continuing process of amalgamation as can be seen in the eruption of popular religiosity/folk Catholicism everywhere, the Church remains reluctant in inculturating our sacraments and liturgy, even at the level of the BECs. A theological reading of this reality might help to explain why and inspire more churchworkers to take on the challenge more aggressively.
- *Christology and Soteriology.* The complex cosmology of most IP communities provides insights into the realm of the “other world” (with constructs such as skyworld and underworld) and the hierarchy of deities. There are also mythical heroes in their epic stories that have echoes of Jesus. This is how Rey Iletto’s *Pasyon and Revolution*<sup>3</sup> theorized on the Passion story as a parallel to the epic stories of our ancestors and Jesus to the mythical heroes in the epics. If Filipino theology is to have “the face of the native” (paraphrasing Pope Francis’ desire of the Local Church wearing the native face), it has to dialogue with our folk literature and how these were intertwined into the ancestors’ beliefs in the deity and the spirit world. Is there a way this can be done?

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<sup>3</sup>See Reynaldo Clemeña Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila Press: 1997).

- *Missiology*. Today, we reject missiological procedures that can be judged as exclusivistic in terms of a strong proselytization thrust. However, our attempts at being inclusivist may be less vulgar and more acceptable in the post-Vatican II era, but this is also problematic in fields where we still privilege the different aspects of Christianity: the dominance of teaching the Bible, conversion processes, doctrine dissemination, bowing to the hierarchical/clerical structure of the Church. This is where our missiological thrust should really be inter-religious dialogue, recognizing the indigenous belief system with an integrity and sacredness of its own. But are our theologians ready to engage in this kind of dialogue considering that this could create tensions within the institutional Church?

#### A PASTORAL LETTER

To lead us in this project, the members of the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous People (ECIP) have pursued an agenda of encouraging theological and pastoral reflections to advance the Church's IP ministry in the next few years within the spirit of the quincentenary. In a statement issued by the outgoing ECIP Chair, Bishop Prudencio "Jun" Andaya wrote a pastoral letter to his fellow bishops to propose how the Church in the Philippines could more meaningfully celebrate the 500th year anniversary with reference to the plight of the indigenous Filipinos today. His letter reads:

*Keenly aware that the 500th year anniversary of the introduction of Christianity to our ancestors is fast approaching, we know that there are three more years to go to celebrate the various themes decided on by the CBCP: Year of the Youth (2018-2019), Inter-Religious Dialogue and Ecumenism (2019-2020) and Mission (2020-2021).*

*As the CBCP has begun preparing for this significant anniversary event which constitutes a Grand Jubilee Year for us in the Philippines, may we humbly suggest that since there was no Year of the Indigenous Peoples (although they were thought of being included in the Year of the Poor), that we find a way for the inclusion of the IPs in the forthcoming events. This is because there is an urgency of taking into consideration the plight of the 10 million or more indigenous peoples throughout the country. More importantly, there is a need for Filipino Catholics to reclaim their indigenous legacy from their ancestors who were all IPs at the dawn of colonial conquest. Thus, we would like to propose that we find ways to make our celebration more meaningful for our people. In this way we as Filipino Catholics can then enrich both our faith and culture.*

*We would like to return to the PCP II document which exhorts the faithful to embrace both the lights and the shadows. Dealing with the latter, the document states that “the faith came to us, though not always without an element of duress, in an age which glorified the union of cross and sword” (No.7). Further, the same document stated that the irony is that our ancestors who resisted colonization to retain their freedom and sovereignty ultimately yielded these to the powers of the lowlanders. Looking back to the context in which Christianity was introduced to us by the Spanish friars, many historians claim that evangelization came with colonization with a conquest agenda from the center of the Spanish Empire.*

*Thus, the theologian Jose de Mesa claimed during the ECIP seminar for the bishops in 2010 that Filipino culture bears a stigma that:*

*while the culture has basically more than survived the colonial experience, the Filipino perception of it has been damaged. Colonialism, together with its continuation in neo-colonialism, had compelled people to reject themselves and to be ashamed of their identity... (as the) abuse they had suffered in the hands of the Spaniards (and later the Americans) had substantially lowered their self-esteem and demeaned their dignity.”*

*If the task of inculturation should move forward, we need to reckon with our own”particular historical past. This involves dealing with the colonial experiences that had brought a stigma on the indigenous culture as being second-rate compared to the Western one, resulting in our sense of inferiority which needs to be overcome. If the task of inculturation should move forward, we need to re-value our culture taking into account contemporary exigencies. The effort to raise the corporate cultural self-esteem of Filipinos has necessarily to struggle with the challenges of today’s local as well as global realities.*

*Then follows the need to relativize the inherited cultural expressions of the faith, situating these in their cultural context, becoming aware how limited they are and facilitating a fresh interpretation of a faith which is more culturally meaningful and challenging. This demands a retrieval of the indigenous knowledge, systems, practices and spirituality (IKSPS) constituted in our ancestors’ indigenous belief system. This call is registered strongly in Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*. This kind of hermeneutics can only enrich simultaneously the faith and the culture at a time when both are threatened by the onslaught of secularism now prevalent in the West.*

*In this context, we would like to present these proposals:*

1. *Since it is no longer possible to declare a Year of the Indigenous Peoples, we suggest that in the Year of IRD and Ecumenism, there be a conscious integration of our pastoral care for the IPs. Dialogue presumes mutual enrichment where two equal partners are able to enrich each other. Shifting from our earlier pastoral orientation of a benevolent viewing of IPs as beneficiaries, we strive to recognize their IKSPS embedded in our ancestors' legacy. If the richness of this legacy is fully appreciated we can better define our Filipino identity and actively contribute to nation-building.*

2. *In the following Year of the Mission, we propose that the IP people's ancestral domains be an important locus for mission where an integral evangelization can continue to take place. This involves: "a journey that starts in a dialogue of life and faith, and moves into a continuous mutual discovery and celebration of each other's values. Witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus and affirming IP spirituality, together we respect human dignity, uphold the right to ancestral domain and cultural identity and work towards total human and ecological development." (cf. ECIP-IPA 2010 Statement).*

*Given the reality that through the centuries, the ancestors and descendants of IPs have gradually been losing our ancestors' legacy and the sacred web of relationship between peoples and Mother Nature, this kind of mission is definitely urgent. In this connection, we recognize the significant role that can be played by indigenous diocesan priests, religious and lay collaborators who are in a better position to embrace this missiological challenge.*

3. Lastly, we initiate a nation-wide event – simultaneously taking place in all faith communities, BECs, parishes and dioceses on the same set date and widely publicized to mobilize major media coverage – where the Church formally asks pardon to our indigenous ancestors and descendants. St. John Paul II himself symbolically asked forgiveness and read a document with these words:

*“As the Successor of Peter, I ask that in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters. All have sinned and none can claim righteousness before God. Christians are invited to acknowledge, before God and before those offended by their actions, the faults which they have committed.”<sup>4</sup>*

This tradition goes back to the Leviticus (Chapter 25) and is remembered by Jesus Himself in Luke 4. The ECIP did come up with a statement at the 28<sup>th</sup> ECIP-IPA National Convention in 2010 stating that:

*integral evangelization calls us as a Church to a humble examination of conscience and towards a healing of historical wounds by asking pardon for sins committed against IPs*

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<sup>4</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente: Apostolic Letter On Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000*, no. 33 (1994), [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19941110\\_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html) (accessed 10 June 2019).

*1. We also suggest that beyond 2021, the entire Church in the Philippines continue translating this symbolic act into mainstreaming our IP ministry. Once we respond to this urgent missiological challenge we give life to the Church's call for reconciliation and solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples and fulfill Christ's mandate that all of creation be one (cf. Eph 1:10).*

*SIGNED: Bishop Prudencio Andaya, CICM, D.D.*

Following the receipt of this letter, this was taken up as an agenda by the CBCP assembly and the proposal was approved, namely, that 2020 will be the Year of Inter-religious Dialogue, Indigenous People and Ecumenism. More developments took place as a result of this decision. Nation-wide consultations among the Coordinators of the diocesan IP Ministries with their lay staff as well as contacts among the Indigenous Leaders were held in 5 areas of the country throughout 2019. The objectives of these consultations included: 1) to find out the current situation of the IPs throughout the country; 2) an assessment of how their indigenous knowledge, skills, practices and spiritualities continue to empower them in their communities as well as how they have responded to the issues confronting them; 3) an assessment as to the quality of the Church's response to their realities; and 4) challenges as to how the IP ministry could be more pro-active in being in solidarity with the IPs as they face urgent social and ecological struggles.

## CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Major problems and struggles reported from the ground level indicate the same issues that have afflicted them through the past decades going back to the years of the Marcos dictatorship. The first and foremost of these is still on the issue of their rights to their ancestral domain. While the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act

(IPRA) has been passed in 1997 providing them with possibilities of acquiring Certificate of Ancestral Domain Titles (CADT), the actual experience has been quite dismal. While it cannot be denied that there have been some successful efforts, these have been more the exception. Most applications have proven to be problematic and unsuccessful. Today – by and large, based on actual research on the ground – IPRA has not resulted in a radical solution to the IPs’ quest to have control over their remaining ancestral territories.

Reasons behind these include the inefficiency and lack of competence of the staff of the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP). More often than not, most IPs are not pleased with the quality of their service. To add to this quagmire, there is also the difficulties dealing with the Indigenous People Mandatory Representative (IPMR) who, in many occasions, are not the kind of traditional *datu* who hold the position in the service of the tribespeople. Chosen by politicians (and sometimes even by the military), some of who were never recognized by the communities as a traditional leader and lacking the competence of a true tribal leader, most of the IPMRs are plain *inutil* as far as most IPs are concerned.

The continuing incursion of corporate and landlord interests into the IPs’ territories further complicate the land issue. The major corporate threat has been the continuing attempt on the part of mining firms to continue with existing operations as well as expand into new sites. As the State continues to support these firms, the extent of mining has expanded to various minerals including coal, considering the construction of more fire-powered coal plants. As for the landlords who include local politicians, they continue to extend their agri-business plantations towards the interior villages which are the last frontier for the IPs.



It is to be expected that the IPs – many of who are descendants from warrior ancestors – would resist and fight back in various ways. When they turn militant, they are immediately red-tagged. Consequently, harassment, arrest, imprisonment and even the killing of their leaders follow. There have also been reported bombings of these communities. These plus the continuing military harassment and violation of their human rights have resulted in the displacement of the indigenous communities who evacuate their homes for safer grounds. In some of the IP communities where Lumad schools were established, the State had recently declared them as “centers for indoctrination” and the Department of Education has ordered them closed. Where these are the schools available for the Lumad children, their closure has now deprived them of their need for education.

Other problems that continue to impact on the lives of the IPs include poverty, lack of access to social services, malnutrition of their children, health issues, poor agricultural output as their farms no longer as are fertile as before and they are forced to adopt the lowlanders’ manner of farming and the declining quality of their leaders. Further inroads of migrant stocks to their territories further corrupt whatever remaining cultural legacies they still practice.

There is so much challenge faced by the Church in strengthening its IP ministry. And yet there are less personnel who are willing to be active in this missionary field. And funds are not as available as before. Church people, immersed among the Lumads, also face the risk of being red-tagged and harassed. But these realities should push missionaries to do much more in the coming years. Perhaps the hope that will be enkindled by the celebrations around the 500<sup>th</sup> year anniversary could provide a spark that would provide us with the light as to how we can advance in terms of our desire to be enriched by our indigenous wellsprings, as we make ourselves instruments of plentiful redemption for the IPs who in this country today are truly “the least of our brothers and sisters!”

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