



Urban Faith Transits: Tactical Spaces in the Everyday Ordinary

ABSTRACT

The paper starts from narratives of ordinary lives in Davao City and presents these narratives as points of departure for theological reasoning and a missiological response of the local Church. The new evangelization of the Church must include listening to the stories of “the least, the last, and the lost” as well as being immersed in their situation. In this context, the mission of the Church is to journey alongside her faithful, most especially, the ordinary people, pushing forward towards liberation and salvation.

INTRODUCTION

The metropolis is a theater of stories. As a place of encounter between the narratives of persons and the historical, cultural, and religious milieux, there exists a multitude of identities, a plurality of meanings converging or diverging at an urban territory. Within its walls, we encounter the narratives of ordinary people who traverse the urban jungle and make sense of an utterly chaotic life in the big city. Their struggles against harsh realities, such as poverty, displacement, and social injustice are sojourn



stories whose destinations are perpetually beyond and unheard of. From the perspective of theology, we view them as a people of faith in a continuing transit.

This paper is a tapestry of ideas that has one overall trajectory: to articulate a theological reflection on the everyday experiences of ordinary people in the city. Making Davao City as the context of this theological pursuit, this synthesis looks at the narratives of the common person from the perspective of faith. In the narratives I share, the storytellers serve as protagonists who come from different walks of life and who have diverse experiences. Despite the heterogeneity of their experiences, one common strand that holds all their stories together is the fact that they can be likened to pilgrims on a journey. The term “urban faith transits” is a neologism I invented to capture this aspect of “a pilgrimage in the city” in the narratives. It describes their everyday experience of constantly being engaged in episodes of “perpetual departures” and “spiritual displacements.” Utilizing the thoughts of Michel de Certeau¹ regarding the “everyday life,” I seek to reveal in this study, as Nick O’Brien puts it, “a series of ‘tactics’ that constitute acts of resistance and that can therefore be read as signs of faith in something better, more humane and, ultimately, divine.”² This study puts forward the idea that narratives of everyday experience are potent points of departure for theological reasoning and a missiological response of a Church that looks at the city as a locus of mission and evangelization.

¹Michel de Certeau is a Jesuit who, according to Philip Sheldrake, is one of the most creative French intellectuals of the late twentieth century. A contemporary of Michel Foucault, de Certeau’s intellectual expertise is seen in various scientific disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, psychology, politics, cultural theory, and other social sciences. This paper utilizes his thoughts in the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), especially his notion of “tactics” as a framework for interpreting the everyday experiences of the common person in the urban context.

²Nick O’ Brien, “Faith as ‘Journey,’” *Spirituality* 22 (May/June 2016): 151.

PAINTING A PICTURE OF DAVAO: FROM MICRO-NARRATIVES TO A PANOPTIC PERSPECTIVE

This section renders an autobiographical account of personal encounters with ordinary people, which is then juxtaposed with the socioeconomic situation of the city. This section grounds the context of this study in the attempt to *listen* and reflect (philosophically and theologically) on the experiences of those who “walk in the city.”³

Narratives of the Ordinary

January 12, 2016. News broke out that Baressa, one of the GKK⁴ areas of the Redemptorist Parish, had just been demolished. A team of theology students, including myself, did not hesitate: we visited the place and assess the residents’ situation upon hearing the news. What we stumbled upon was the sight of people crying outside their houses, which had been torn down. We were silenced. All we could do was to embrace some of those who were crying and gently wipe our own tears. The next day, we were there again. This time, Amy Leparan, a catechist, was celebrating her birthday. She insisted that we stay and share a meal with her family. I remember her saying, “We might not have a roof, but we still have each other. God is still good.”

Amir Hussein, a Grade 3 pupil of Bolton Elementary School and a resident of Boulevard, sells peanuts every night in the busy streets of the city. It’s hard to imagine that this kid goes to school in the morning and roams the streets at night. He is just one among many. I met him on several occasions, and at one time I asked, “Why do you have to sell peanuts every day?” “I have to help my family, especially my three siblings” was his answer. On another instance I asked him, “Do you often go to the mosque to

³This phrase is an allusion to the essay “Walking in the City” found in de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91-110.

⁴GKK stands for *Gagmay nga Kristohanong Katilingban*, which is Cebuano for “Basic Ecclesial Communities.”

pray?” He answered, “I believe in Allah, but much of my time is spent in selling than praying in the mosque.”

Ellen Madasigon, a Pulanguion *Lumad* from Kitawtaw, White Kulaman, has been staying in Haran along with her family for almost a year now. She recounted to me how she was violently apprehended and accused with unsubstantiated charges of rebellion by the military forces on August 27, 2015. This was understandable given that she was a known Lumad leader of their barangay and was vocal in resisting mining companies that were interested in exploiting their place. When I met her, she and her family could not go back to their ancestral domain, which they consider home because of military occupation. I remember her saying, “My choice of remaining in this place, [no matter] how difficult it may be, is my way of protesting against the military and the mining companies as they try to steal our land.”

Davao from a Socioeconomic and Panoptic View

These narratives provide us with an experiential and realistic account of the situation of ordinary people in the city. Another perspective from which one can have a “bird’s-eye view” of the place and its people is from the socioeconomic and panoptic view. Davao City is considered one of the most progressive cities in the Philippines. The Davaoño scholar, Dr. Macario D. Tiu speaks of his hometown as the most important city in Mindanao and the third most important commercial and trading center in the country after Manila and Cebu.⁵ A quick tour of the city gives a picture of the potentials of Davao in becoming a highly commercialized and urbanized center.

Davao is also home to people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Among its locals are the indigenous peoples known as *Lumads*, the “Moros” or Muslims, the settlers who are of Visayas and Luzon origins, and a sizeable number of foreigners, such as

⁵Macario D. Tiu, *Davao: Reconstructing History from Text and Memory* (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao University Research and Publication Office, 2005), 37.

the Chinese and Indians. The census of 2015 records the city's population at 1,632,991, making it the most populous city in Mindanao and the third populous in the whole country.⁶ The city inhabitants are of various ethnicities with different religio-cultural identities. Historically, the *Lumads* were the original inhabitants of this place. Currently, majority of Davao's population are Bisayans, while the predominant religion being practiced is Roman Catholic.⁷

Davao is dubbed as the "crown jewel" of Mindanao in terms of economic progress and activity. According to the National Economic and Development Authority, because of its strategic location, Davao City was developed as a regional trade center for Southern Mindanao; an international trade center to the Southern Pacific; and the Southern Gateway, more particularly to and from the neighboring countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Australia, among others.⁸ Yet despite prospects of a promising future and the supposed development in the people's standard of living, Davao is no stranger to persistent socioeconomic and political problems that affect the lives of ordinary people. As big corporations and multinational companies continue to do business in the city, people coming from the basic sectors are perpetually battling against poverty and the manifold insecurities of city living. Stories of displacement, homelessness, hunger, and extreme poverty ceaselessly haunt the underprivileged and marginalized.

There is, therefore, a noticeable paradox in the Davao situation. Whereas the government boasts of accelerating economic growth owing to a boom in capital businesses, trade and industry, tourism, agriculture and infrastructure, there are quite a number of people who have no access to basic commodities and a decent

⁶PSA (Philippine Statistics Authority), "Population Counts by Legislative Districts (2015)." <https://psa.gov.ph/content/population-counts-legislative-district-based-2015-census-population>.

⁷City Government of Davao, "Compilation of Socio-Economic Indicators (2014)." [http://www.davaocity.gov.ph/cpdo/downloads/Socio-Economicindicato rs\(2009-2013\)20150327110208.pdf](http://www.davaocity.gov.ph/cpdo/downloads/Socio-Economicindicato rs(2009-2013)20150327110208.pdf).

⁸NEDA (National Economic and Development Authority), "Region XI - Davao City." <http://nro11.neda.gov.ph/davao-region/davao-city/>.

income.⁹ In 2012,¹⁰ the National Statistical Coordination Board declared that in Davao, a family of five needed a monthly income of Php 5,788 to meet basic food needs and Php 8,320 to stay out of poverty and to sustain their food and nonfood needs.¹¹ With all the encounters I have had with people in poverty-stricken barangays of the city in the past four years, I wonder how many of the people are really able to live by these standards. The City Social Service Development Office of Davao reports a poverty incidence of 20.5 percent in the Davao Region, which means that one out of five families in Davao has an income lesser than Php 1,886.50 monthly.¹² This is hardly enough for a family of five. Thus, the official figures and statistics conveying the message that Davao is developing can fail to truly represent the situation of the city, even to the point of denying the plight of the ordinary people who are excluded from this so-called progress and development.

The stories of Amy, Amir, and Ellen portray a picture of how the underprivileged devise ruses to survive the daily grind of city life. Their stories represent the everyday life of those at the fringes, those whom an elitist society would want to dismiss, if not eliminate. Listening to their narratives makes one realize the neglect of a society who despite professing concerns for security and development has become ironically deaf to their plight. In contrast, such a developed and institutionalized society should place its priority on looking after the most vulnerable members of the society. And yet their stories are not at all tales that talk about defeat. Despite their unfavorable situation and the complexities of their circumstances, they somehow manage to get by and momentarily overcome everyday difficulties. Discernible marvels manifest in their stories.

⁹City Government of Davao, *Compilation of Socio-Economic Indicators*.

¹⁰2012 was the year in which I arrived in Davao as a Redemptorist theology student.

¹¹NSCB (National Statistics Coordination Board), "Poverty in Davao Region." <http://www.nscb.gov.ph/ru11/PRODUCTS/factsheet/2013/FS12-RD11-2013f-poverty2012.pdf>.

¹²The data is from the public document "Socio-Economic Indicators 2016," which is available in the City Social Service Development Office of the City Government of Davao.

MAKING SENSE OF THE NARRATIVES OF THE ORDINARY

Learners of theology must dare ask: How does one speak of God out of such raw experiences? Does the difficulty in grappling with the God question imply God's silence, or even worse his death? And yet theologians speak of a "mystery" that permeates everyday experiences. Peter Phan argues, "The presence of God—silently present and silencing his presence—occurs as a nameless mystery in the depths of our everyday experiences and hence is frequently ignored, misinterpreted, and even suppressed."¹³ With this, Michel de Certeau gives the challenge of looking at daily life as potent with wonders, even to the extent that they can be divine manifestations of the profoundly sacred. He posits that daily activities, such as "housing, clothing, housework, cooking, and an infinite number of rural, urban, family, or amical activities, the multiple forms of professional work, are also the ground on which creation everywhere blossoms."¹⁴ Considering this hypothesis, the routine of everyday life becomes possible divine pedagogies or discernible ways of the divine. He writes, "Daily life is scattered with marvels, a froth on the long rhythms of language and history that is as dazzling as that of writers and artists."¹⁵ Such an awe-filled gaze at the everyday can come only from a mystic who sees "more than what meets the eye" in the present moment.

TACTIC: THE MYSTICISM OF EVERYDAY

Michel de Certeau first locates the so-called tacticians or ordinary citizens as those who "live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins."¹⁶ In an enigmatic description, they are the fissures rupturing out of a placid, austere, and totalizing image of a city. In concrete, this means that the face of the everyday

¹³Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 270.

¹⁴Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, trans. Tom Comley (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 142.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

poor presents another picture of the city that challenges mesmerized imaginings of progress and advancement.

To appreciate and discern the divine in the everyday tactics of people, one must become a mystic of the everyday. Mysticism understood in this sense is a continuous endeavor of making faith sensible in the everyday moments of our lives. This kind of mystical gaze is a spirituality of the real life in which the “rough grounds” of everyday occasions the blossoming of faith. It translates into an attitude of openness that recognizes the presence of God’s grace at the heart of every human experience. Yet this kind of mystical gaze is not easy to exercise because we have grown so familiar with an established lacuna between the place of the sacrosanct and the liminal space of the mundane. In other words, we distinguish the holy from the unholy by limiting its presence in obvious places, such as the church, temple, shrine, and the like. The radical challenge of narratives is the transformation of an attitude of suspicion towards the world’s godlessness into an attitude of openness towards the possibility of God’s revelation in a fragmented world. The gap dissipates when one is open to see the divine traces in the everyday ordinary. Jesus, the human face of God who is portrayed in the gospels as the one who abandons the ninety-nine in the sheepfold to seek the lost one, is amid those outside the walls of the Church. He is continuously being incarnated in the tactics of ordinary people.

JESUS WHO PROMPTS US TO DEPART

With God’s people in constant transits of faith, one conjures an image of Jesus as a perpetual wanderer. He is a pilgrim who, despite possessing no “place,” continues to create “spaces” where encounters with him become occasions for healing and reconciliation, and thus, manifestations of God. Jesus’s itinerancy is a fundamental tactic characterizing his missionary identity and work. Being in constant transit, he becomes ever more immanent to those at the fringes while, at the same time, elusive to the dominating powers who threaten him. Being in constant episodes

of departures, we can only catch glimpses of his presence in the everyday. But this Jesus who eludes us has also prompted us to depart, leading us on towards that sprawling horizon of divine and meaningful encounter. In a resurrection narrative, the angel informs Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, “He is not here... He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee” (Mt 28:6-7). The resurrected Jesus has left the tomb, and his disappearance permits the maturation of the faith of his followers.

For de Certeau, the disappearance of Jesus exemplified in the image of the empty tomb is a necessary condition for the possibility of faith and its development. He puts forth the idea that “Jesus effaces himself to give faithful witness to the Father, who authorizes him, and to ‘give rise’ to different but faithful communities, which he makes possible.”¹⁷ The evanescent presence of a perpetually wandering Jesus results into a Christian following. From the non-appearance of Jesus, a community of faith is born. This community gives witness to a triune God, who in its essence, is love-relationship. Thus, through community practice and Trinitarian theology, the death of Jesus becomes the condition for the new Church to arise and for new languages of the Gospel to develop.¹⁸ The space of Jesus’ non-appearance results into a commissioning of wandering preachers who, through the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit, shall continue the missionary work of the Redeemer.

The Jesus who is outside the tomb has come to meet his hurting, fearful, and wounded disciples. The resurrected Christ appears to them, still with scars and wounds, wishing them peace. With his divine inspiration, the pilgrim Jesus prompts Christians to leave the tombs of security and smug assurance of an established religion to serve the poor with compassion and charity. It is in the

¹⁷Michel de Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Massachusetts, MA: Blackwell Publisher Inc., 1997), 145.

¹⁸Ibid.

everyday witness of compassion and love that the narrative of Jesus continues to be told today.

The itinerant Jesus meets us “on the way” and journeys with us as we continue our life’s pilgrimage. He, whom we meet in a very intimate way through the sacrament of the Eucharist, sends us forth to be missionaries on the streets. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo beautifully ponders on this:

Christ died in the street, dragged on the streets, proclaimed his good news on the streets, and affirmed the human dignity in the streets. His altar was the world, He broke the bread of healing, He broke the bread of feeding, He broke the bread of reconciling, He broke the bread of Good News.¹⁹

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The heterogeneous landscape and demographics of a cosmopolitan city present difficulties as well as opportunities to the Church in her missiological activity. The question remains: How do we engage people in the city from the perspective of faith? Instead of providing an action plan or a blueprint as to how this should be done, this synthesis opts to suggest guidelines so that missiological initiatives of the Church in the urbanized context may be more effective.

Mission in the City: The Challenge to be Interdisciplinary

During the fourth Abdon Josol Theological Lecture series held at the Ateneo de Davao University, Bro. Karl Gaspar, C.Ss.R. emphasized the novel challenges of evangelizing in a highly urbanized area. Initial steps of evangelizing require being able to really understand and have a good analysis of the rhythms and demographics of the city. This is only possible by approaching the city from an interdisciplinary level where technology, modes of production, culture, and other aspects of city living are analyzed

¹⁹“Message and Homily of Cardinal Charles Maung Bo at the Opening Mass” in the International Eucharistic Congress 2016. <http://iec2016.ph/7005/>.

and are parceled into the discourse of mission work. The challenge for Church people and religious congregations who are operating in the city is to have an interdisciplinary perspective in looking at the various phenomena of city life. Corollary to this is the significant role that lay people who specialize in different fields play in the enterprise of mission and evangelization.

To give concrete examples, conducting sociological research and utilizing the data in parishes to improve the pastoral and missiological approaches in the ministry are deemed indispensable. In the event of natural calamities and catastrophes, the pooling of volunteers who specialize in disciplines, such as medicine and health care, post-trauma counseling and psychospiritual interventions, disaster risk reduction and livelihood programs, etc. to make concerted efforts to reach out to affected communities is extremely helpful. Social media and cyberspace are mission frontiers where the Church can effectively reach out to the millennial generation and preach the Gospel in innovative ways. These are just some of the manifold activities that the Church, who by her Trinitarian and Eucharistic spirituality, can initiate to bring people together and work for the common welfare of humanity and the whole of creation.

MISSION IN THE CITY: GOING BACK TO THE EVERYDAY ORDINARY

The urban environment changes with social transition, “migrancy,” community tension, and social conflict. There is competition and conflict, as well as forms of cooperation and coexistence. Amidst all these, there is the serious task of considering the manner in which people expound their faith in an urbanized context. This synthesis is insistent in suggesting that the ordinary narratives of everyday life are potent theological resource in the missiological engagements of the Church. Considering the city as locus missionis implies that stories of the life and faith of peoples can be considered as “spaces” where the traces of the divine become incarnate and tangible. In the city context, the missiological

tactics manifest as witnessing, dialogue, vulnerability, and bold humility.²⁰ These tactics are already discernible in the quotidian narratives of people. Going back to the everyday ordinary as the initial step of doing mission in the city runs counter to the common misconception that one must “sell” or sugarcoat the faith for evangelization to be appealing and engaging. Dealing with the everyday stories of people is a bold yet humble attempt of desperately seeking God’s redemptive action in the ordinariness of life. With such an undertaking, missionaries become grounded in the true situation of ordinary people, the rough grounds where they wrestle with God’s absence or presence.

TOWARDS A PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE EVERYDAY CONTEXT

Understanding spirituality as generally a way of life makes everyday life the very context of spirituality. This initiates a predisposition of wonder and awe in the everyday ordinary, which attunes us to discovering the spiritual potential of everyday experience. The maxim to follow is “finding God in all things”—a theme that is preeminent in the Christian spiritual tradition known as Ignatian spirituality. The “practical type” of spirituality seeks to find spiritual meaning and an effective spiritual path in the context of our everyday experiences, commitments, and activities—whether in family life, work, or other social contexts.²¹ Hence, listening to the narratives of everyday makes one discover the marvels of ordinary experiences and appreciate the transcendent and mystical quality inherent in them.

However, maintaining a positive outlook towards ordinary experience is difficult when one confronts the sorrows, uncertainties, and evils that pervade everyday living. In view of this, a Church that grounds herself in the everyday experience of

²⁰See David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 488–489.

²¹Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 16.

the poor is compelled to journey with God's suffering people. As followers of Christ who on the cross "suffers vicariously for the world," the Church is called to be with the people in enduring and tactically overcoming the social evils of societies.²² More than social activism, this is a brand of Christian spirituality that is proactive and praxis-oriented. This spirituality of standing up for others and taking their place could break up the inward-looking orientation of many communities in their current diaspora situation within a secularized world, and it could become a spiritual guidepost for today and tomorrow.²³

One significant point of discussion regarding everyday spirituality is the challenge of becoming mystics of the everyday. The mysticism of the everyday is primarily modeled after Jesus who is a perpetual wanderer, present among the ephemeral spaces of life's daily rhythms. More than a consciousness, it is an attitude of openness towards the traces of the divine in the quotidian experiences of ordinary people. Considering that life has its share of sorrows, uncertainty, pain, and the reality of social evils, the spirituality of everyday mysticism involves a stance of militant hope that rages against the dying of the light and believes in the liberating power of the cross.

NOT A CONCLUSION, BUT A CONTINUING CHALLENGE

This paper emphasizes the importance of listening to narratives in the whole enterprise of theological and missiological discourse. The city, being the melting pot of people's everyday stories, is both a challenging and promising locus of mission and evangelization on the part of the Church. In the stories of ordinary people, we find accounts of how they devise tactics to survive the daily grind of life. It is from these stories of tactics that we see acts of resistance, somehow showing a stance of militant hope from

²²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1972), 81.

²³Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (Quezon City: Claretian Publications), 155.

the perspective of the vulnerable and powerless. In the spaces of tactics, we see that life is fundamentally a never-ending journey, a series of perpetual departures. It is also in their “urban transits” that we discern God’s grace and divine manifestations. These elements reveal the very meaning of faith. Faith is essentially a journey that involves risking ourselves into the unknown. Faith is also a courageous defiance against injustice and the pervading evils that stifle the individual and the society. Faith as a gift is also the self-communication of the divine in the depths of human experience. In this light, Jesus is the faith tactician par excellence. His life and mission culminating in the paschal mystery of his suffering, death, and resurrection is a powerful narrative that conveys good news to the everyday marginalized.

The urban context continues to bring about unprecedented challenges to the Church. There is the proliferation of the materially and spiritually poor, and the emergence of the “new poor,” i.e., migrants, displaced persons, minorities, etc. They constitute the ordinary people who wander in the city. The Church, in her program of new evangelization, must turn to their simple stories and respond to them, instead of advocating a grand narrative that utilizes a language of power and authority in preaching the Gospel. Being grounded in the real situation of the “the least, the last, and the lost” is part and parcel of her missionary identity and activity. Doing mission in the city, therefore, first entails a closer look into the stories of the faithful, discerning both the traces of divine and evil imbued in them. A Church situated in the city is called to go beyond its walls of security and affluence to immerse herself into the dire situation of those at the peripheries. From there, the Church is challenged to journey alongside her suffering and hurting people, pushing forward towards liberation and salvation, and thus, becoming truly a sacrament of God.

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