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MIGRATION AND RELIGIOSITY: THE FILIPINO SEAFARERS ONBOARD ABROAD

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Introduction

It is almost always inevitable that migration be linked to religion, and consequently impinge on religious commitment or involvement. When people migrate, they bring with them their religious beliefs, ideas and tradition which impact daily life, work, social relationships, and the receiving Church in the new land. It is, therefore, inescapable that change takes place. Josef Barton, a sociologist and historian, points out that immigration, as a process of transformation, "is at once a sign of change and an agent of change". As a result of the journey from one cultural and social world to another, Barton argues that immigration produces radical change within the realms of the religious, political, familial, and personal life.¹ Rúben Rumbaut points out that despite different languages and the perils to children of life in a complex society, the present wave of immigration is more likely to add than to subtract from the wealth and cultural vitality of the nation². Given this premise of linkage between migration and religion or the religiousness of believers, figures would suggest the shape and extent of the change that will ensue.³

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¹BARTON, Josef. "Religion and Cultural Change in Czech Immigrant Communities, 1850-1920". *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America*, 1977, p. 3

² RUMBAUT, Reuben and PORTES, Alejandro. "Immigrant America", Los Angeles, 1996.

³ In this study, the terms religion and religiousness are broadly used, and they intersect with each other where religious belief, experience and practice are visited to value Filipino seafarers' religiosity. The article should be seen as representative rather than exhaustive, given the complexity where migration and religiousness interphase.

Global Trends

The past decade saw unprecedented movement of peoples across international borders, a consequence of globalization and by-product of wars, civil conflicts, religious persecutions, natural disasters, poverty or search for better economic opportunities. The U.N. Population Division estimates that there are now almost 200 million international migrants. In the area of development, the World Bank in its recently published *Global Economic Prospects 2006* reported that officially recorded worldwide remittances for 2005 was US \$232 billion which flowed from developed to developing countries and South to South transfers. Possibly, this amount is twice as much for unofficial remittances. Given these staggering figures, migration is seen to saturate the stratum of life both individually and collectively in the country of origin, transit and destination for those who migrate, and for the families left behind. Migration and religion are critical, causal or consequential components of change.

Filipino Seafarers

The Philippines has a long history of immigration. It is interesting to note that the first Filipinos to migrate to the United States were seamen.

Tracing the long history and experience of the Filipino seafarers' sojourn in foreign lands, it is not surprising to see that today, one out of five seafarers in the world is a Filipino. In 2006, there were 260,084 Filipino seafarers deployed abroad, representing a growth of 4.9 percent compared to 2005. During the first 10 months of 2006, Filipino seafarers sent a total of US\$ 1.589 billion as remittances.⁴ Thanks to the Philippine Government aggressive marketing campaign, the Philippines still remains the leading supplier of seafarers. The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) set up an integrated mobilization system with the establishment of the One-stop Center (PSOC). This center, created in 2003, provides a "more efficient and effective documentation service to Filipino seafarers"⁵. The PSOC is composed of 14 cooperative government agencies housed in the POEA building.

Filipino seafarers like other seafarers are often away from their families for many months due to the nature of their work. While there are advantages to working abroad in a ship such as better paying jobs as compared to jobs in the Philippines, yet there are drawbacks that have

⁴ UY, Veronica. *Filipino Seafarers Deployed in 2006*. Inquirer Express.com. Manila, 2006 (accessed on March 28, 2007).

⁵ *Deployment of Filipino Seafarers Projected to Increase*, OFW Guide.com. Quezon City, 2004 (accessed on March 23, 2007).

been mentioned on many instances. Sometimes seafarers and fishermen become victims of illegal recruitment. If he/she is deployed by an [manning] agency there is a possibility of a contract substitution wherein the signed contract is replaced at the jobsite, and a lower position and salary is given to the seafarer. Abuses are also in the form of non-payment of wages and benefits. Many times, seafarers and fishermen are discriminated against when onboard of a ship. The seafarers experience many forms of physical, psychological and spiritual deprivations. Deprivation takes its toll on familial relationships: the seafarers and family members have to cope with loneliness and at times there is a [perceived] threat of infidelity among married couples. For those left behind, there are difficulties like solo parenting that have given rise to delinquency among children.⁶

Finding a Common Ground

It would be dangerous to simply equate numbers of a certain population with their religious affiliation and practice as in the case of Filipino seafarers onboard foreign vessels. As this study unfolds, a difficulty encountered is finding available information or substantial data on Filipino seafarers and their religiousness. Undertaken researches focused mostly on the social and economic impact of Filipino seafarers. The lack of data complicates theorizing the relationship between Filipino seafarers and religiousness. However, having outlined statistics on Filipino seafarers abroad, and having seen that the majority of Filipinos are Catholics, it is safe to postulate a correlate between migration, Filipino seafarers and their religiousness and/or Catholic practice. Moreover, data gathered in 2007 by the United States National Office of the Apostleship of the Sea will help substantiate findings on seafarers' Catholic faith - a majority of them being Filipinos - onboard at U.S. ports.

A theoretical framework on religiousness will provide understanding about the process through which religious belief and practice of Filipino seafarers impact their migration experience and vice versa. To ground us in this investigation, it is important to have a common understanding of the word religiousness, which in social scientific use is "a generic term for religious commitment"⁷. It may help to narrow down from the broad, generic term by looking at the dimensions of religiousness, which, according to the European Values Study has two indicators: one is the softer side- "which include feelings, experience, and religious beliefs, and

⁶ TORDILLO, Myrna. "Ministry to Seafarers and their Families" in: *Primeiro Seminario Congregacional de Pastoral Migratória*, Brasília: CSEM, 1995, p. 426.

⁷ SWATOS, William Jr. "Religiosity", in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, p. 406.

the hard indicators that measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment”⁸. These indicators resonate with the four dimensions of religiousness outlined by Clark and Schellenberg, which are: affiliation, attendance, personal practice and importance of religion.⁹

Thus, I propose to build a framework on Filipino seafarers’ religiousness taking into consideration: a) individual aspects of feelings and religious experience; and b) communal aspects such as adherence to Catholic teaching/orthodoxy and participation in ‘ritual activities’. Since I am looking at the relationship between migration and Filipino seafarers’ religiousness, adding the dimension of religious belief and practice in the country of origin to the framework is relevant to the study.

Filipino seafarers and their Faith

Faith plays a significant role in everyday life for the believer. Uprootedness leads, for those who migrate to foreign lands, to seek channels of connection, socialization and ties. The need for connectedness is even more acute for seafarers, who, by the nature of their work, find themselves on board for weeks and even months before seeing land. Noteworthy are the familial concerns that seafarers have, particularly about their beloved ones back home. While seafarers “develop firm solidarity and close relationship with their workmates on board, creating with them a temporary but intense life community”¹⁰, adverse conditions on board a ship, living and working with other seafarers of different nationalities day in and day out in a confined space are among the catalysts for seafarers to come to port. Unfortunately, setting foot on shore does not always happen when a seafarer does not have shore leave, mostly for visa reasons. As one seafarer recounts, it is a lonely life at sea. He further adds, “We call it ‘prisoner of the sea’”¹¹.

Religion offers for the ordinary Filipino Catholic seafarer strength, hope and peace. There are trade-offs and sacrifices for seafarers. Religious experience for him/her does not serve as “opium for the vicissitudes in life”. On the contrary, religious experience results in a living contact with God within the person’s historical context. Neither does it refer to the ways and means to arrive at ecstasy or intense concentration beyond what is normal. Rather, authentic religious experience has the effect of putting in

⁸ *Idem*.

⁹ CLARK, Warren and SCHELLENBERG, Grant. *Who’s Religious?*. Ottawa: Canadian Social Trends, 2006, in: URL: <http://www.statcan.ca>

¹⁰ LE GALL, P. Francois. “The Apostleship of the Sea, The Pastoral Care of Seafarers”, in: *Apostolatus Maris*, Roma: Leberit, 2001, p. 44.

¹¹ *Spiritual Solace for Seafarers*, San Jose, California: San Jose Mercury News, July 10, 2006.

their proper order all the levels of human experience.¹²

What brings into sharp focus is the Filipino Catholic seafarer's attempt at appropriating in his/her life the true value of sacrifice, to live out the faith. It is a fidelity that "summons any serious Christian to courageously follow Jesus Christ in his or her daily encounter at the crossroads of life"¹³. One ship cook comments on participating in the Mass after being at sea for two months, "Mass is very good. It provides a recharge".¹⁴

Orthodoxy and Catholic practice pose a challenge for Filipino Catholic seafarers due to lack of opportunities to be in a regular parish community. To cite an example about the Eucharistic sacrament for those who attend weekly Mass in the Philippines, as the case of the ship cook mentioned above, will find it extremely difficult to be at Mass weekly while on board and at sea. The captain of a ship with an all Filipino crew whom I met during a ship visit in the Port of Houston which was occasioned by the celebration of the Eucharist by the port chaplain, lamented that he missed Mass for long period of times, but look forward when a port chaplain comes on board and celebrate the Mass for them. One crewmember before the Mass started mentioned that popular devotion through the praying of the rosary was done on board once a week when many of the seafarers are not on duty. While it may not be common to have an all Filipino Catholic crew in one ship, nor can we assume that all Filipino Catholic seafarers are very religious, what is demonstrated here is the ordinary living expression and practice of the faith, which has been referred to as an aspect of the 'ritual activity' dimension.

Here we are confronted with the question: what does it mean to be religious. To capture the sense of religiousness is to go back to the identity of Filipino Catholics in the country of origin. Highlighting seafarers' country of origin has its own reason; namely, seafarers, unlike immigrants who intend to settle in the adoptive country, go back to the Philippines after finishing their contract. Naturally, the seafarers maintain a renewed faith practice and religiosity each time he/she goes home.

Filipino Christian Identity

As "hearers and recipients of the Word", the Filipino Christian's response stresses three dimensions. First, "the response in terms of

¹² TORDILLO, Myrna. *The Crucified Christ in the Asceticism of J.B. Scalabrini*. p. 7. Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, 2007.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

person as self and as a person in community; second, the Filipino value system; and third, Filipino Christian values".¹⁵ The true search for Filipino Christian identity finds its ultimate answer in the source and end of our life - God. Following Jesus means "an enduring and intimate commitment to Jesus, a love for him that does not count the cost".¹⁶ The communitarian dimension of the quest for self-understanding should lead back to the first disciples community model, which is love of God through Christ, and by love for one another. And this must be the center of the Filipino Christian life in community. Self- understanding needs also to look at the Filipino value system, which can be enriched by the Gospel. Social scientists pointed to the ambivalence of some Filipino values. However, when properly understood and appropriated in life and function for the good of the individual and for the others, such values are potential for the development and growth in the formation of mature Christians. PCP II points out, "We must take a closer look at how values that we have from our Christian faith can strengthen the good of our cultural values or to correct what is excessive in them, and to remedy for their deficiencies".¹⁷

Thus, some predominant cultural values such as *utang na loob* (which expresses a person's deep sense of gratitude for help extended) can be an experience of undying gratitude of Christians to Jesus who died on the cross. What this value demands is reciprocity from Christians, that is, to love God and neighbor through action. Another cultural value is "*bahala na*", which translated means 'come what may'. It can be viewed as a fatalistic resignation. However, in a Christian perspective, '*bahala na*' is an attitude of trust, to leave everything in God's hands, trusting in Divine Providence that offers the Christian a sense of peace and serenity in times of adversity. "*Hiya*", which literally means 'shame', is a potent means to safeguard morals and ethics in Philippine society. A Catholic understanding can be applied to the "workings of sin and grace in our lives"¹⁸ that will lead to Christian humbleness and modesty. The value of '*pakikisama*', which implies getting along well with others, results in camaraderie and fosters closeness. In the context of Christian solidarity, this value can enhance the formation of an informed conscience, which supports social justice. Filipino cultural values will deepen authentic Christian living in a uniquely Filipino way, when properly redirected.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ "Acts and Decrees". *Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (hereafter referred to as PCP II), n. 278. Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1992.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ "Maturing in Christian Faith", National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines, St. Paul Publications, 1985, n. 30.

Pope John Paul II recognizes that immigrants “often bring with them a cultural and religious heritage which is rich in Christian elements”.¹⁹ Thus, different cultural identities are to open up to a universal way of understanding, not abandoning their own positive elements, but putting them at the service of the whole humankind. The Filipino seafarers embody a rich heritage which they transmit as they practice faith in the reality of life at sea and on port.

The Church’ Pastoral Concern

The Church, ever mindful of the human costs of migration and the consequences for those who migrate, is “committed to spare no effort in developing its own pastoral strategy among those immigrant people”.²⁰ The theological finding that grounds the pastoral lines of the ‘Magisterium’ is the core of the human person and the defense of migrants’ rights, both men and women, and their children; the ecclesial and missionary dimension of migration; the reappraisal of the apostolate of the laity; the value of cultures in the work of evangelization; the protection and appreciation of minority groups in the Church; the importance of dialogue both inside and outside the Church; and the specific contribution of emigration to world peace.²¹

The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in their statement ‘Welcoming the Stranger Among Us’, reaffirmed Church commitment by citing Pope John Paul II words, to work “so that every person’s dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family which knows how to appreciate with discernment the different cultures which comprise it (Message for World Migration Day 2000, n. 5)”.²² The U.S. Catholic Bishops emphasize that the “welcome and hospitality that we ask our parishes to extend to newcomers must include active efforts on the part of the pastor and parish staff, individuals and families...”.²³

Recognizing and reaffirming the contributions of many Catholics in their pastoral responses to the needs of migrants, Pope Benedict XVI makes mention of the, generous response of many men and women, associations and organizations which, seeing the sufferings of countless persons caused by emigration, are struggling for the rights of migrants, forced or voluntary,

¹⁹ PAUL, Pope John II. *The Church in America*, Washington: USCCB, 1999, p. 108.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, n. 65.

²¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, 2004, n. 27.

²² U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS. *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us, Unity in Diversity*, p. 23. Washington, DC, USCCB, Inc., 2000.

²³ *Idem*, p. 33.

and for their defense. The commitment of these people can be attributed above all to that compassion of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, that the Spirit stirs up everywhere in the hearts of men and women of good will and in the Church too, which “relives once more the mystery of its Divine Founder, the mystery of life and death”.²⁴

One of those who responded to the challenges of migration and concretely set mechanisms for action was the Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini (1839-1905), founder of the Missionary Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo, and the Missionaries of St. Charles. Then Bishop of Piacenza, Italy, Blessed Scalabrini, in a century that was not fashionable to speak and defend migrants’ dignity and rights, formulated a plan for assistance “to wage implacable war against human flesh traders, i.e. against those who exploit immigrants’ misery, and to promote religious assistance during the journey, after disembarking and in the places where migrants are accustomed to settle”.²⁵

These plans were carried out in many different ways up to the present time through the missionary activities of the religious Scalabrinian women and men who minister to migrants, immigrants, and refugees. Many more people, either individually or as belonging to an institution, have promoted and/or offered pastoral assistance on behalf of the migrants.

The Apostleship of the Sea

The Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) or *Apostolatus Maris* in Latin is an international Catholic organization that began in 1899 in Glasgow, Scotland. Today, Stella Maris Centers around the world offer pastoral care to all who live from seafaring and fishing, their dependents and communities.

In the United States of America, the AOS “is active over 61 American sea ports; these include the ports along the Pacific Coast such as Alaska and Hawaii, the Gulf Coast and ports along the Great Lakes”. [...] Besides the spiritual care, Catholic port chaplains and the team members also extend assistance by making available: a) access to communications such as telephones, cell phones, phone cards, the internet; b) a place to relax in a seafarers’ center by offering refreshments, or a choice of food in a snack bar or restaurant, game rooms and other recreational activities, a swimming pool and a basketball court; c) giving out reading materials either religious or secular; d) or managing money transfer for a seafarer.²⁶

²⁴ *Erga migrantes*, n. 3.

²⁵ TOMASI, Silvano (editor). *For the Love of Immigrants, Migration Writings and Letters of Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini*, p. 154-155. New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1999.

²⁶ AOS National Director’s Annual Report, 2007.

Thus, the Apostleship of the Sea in the U.S.A. provides for the spiritual and material welfare of seafarers and fishermen. In his concluding observations at the XXI AOS World Congress, Archbishop Marchetto reminded participants,

I make an appeal from this Congress to all A. M. people around the world that they continue to welcome, serve and support all seafarers, independent of their different culture, nationality and religion, and stand by them and help them in solidarity in their struggles for justice. This will only be a small seed of a new world, more human and more fraternal, but an important seed.²⁷

Archbishop Marchetto also stressed the importance of working in an ecumenical spirit of cooperation.

In Search of a Synthesis

Filipino Catholic seafarers, as they come to U.S. ports on board of ships, bring with them their religious and cultural identities. Expressions of faith, culture and Christian values are embodiments of who they are as migrants, seafarers and Catholics from a different cultural milieu. By their numbers, they impact the local receiving Church, making liturgical celebrations through their worship and popular devotions. The Apostleship of the Sea, through its chaplains and vibrant chaplainry team members, makes possible for seafarers, regardless of color or race, to find a spiritual haven and social assistance, therefore recognizing the dignity of person, and welcoming the newcomer in a spirit of solidarity, in unity through diversity. Migration, then, is seen to impact religiousness of the seafarers. At the same time, their religiousness and faith practice mitigate difficult situations during their migration. Scalabrinian Missionary Sisters live with the migrants and support them in this process.

²⁷ MARCHETTO, Archbishop Agostino. "Concluding Observations", *XXI World Congress of Apostolatus Maris*. Vatican City, 2002, <http://vatican.va>