

# FILIPINO MIGRANT CYBERCHURCHES IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PRELIMINARY EXPOSITION OF TWO CITIES (BRUSSELS CFC-ANCOP AND ATHENS'S MMC)

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedentedly altered the face of the world whose shockwaves have significantly impacted mobility, the economy, and even the area of ecclesiology. Filipino migrants are among those who are severely affected by this global health crisis.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as in most unfortunate circumstances, Filipino religiosity and resilience persist.<sup>2</sup> They are not hailed as “God’s secret weapon” by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization without reason.<sup>3</sup> Time and again, like the pliant bamboo tree, they have proven their ability to survive and, to a certain extent, thrive under difficult conditions. Thus, even in the midst of the pandemic, parish life among Filipino migrants continues to flourish, which has providentially migrated to Cyberspace which can be seen as a fitting tribute to the Quincentenary of Philippine Christianity whose thrust is *missio ad gentes*.*

*This current study, therefore, will explore how the notion of “cyberchurch”<sup>4</sup> has been appropriated by two Catholic communities in Europe (i.e.,*

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<sup>1</sup> See Regine Cabato, “For Filipino Migrant Workers Coronavirus Dashes their Ticket to a Better Life,” *The Washington Post* (September 9, 2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/coronavirus-unemployment-philippines-migrant-workers/2020/09/09/37972290-e688-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/coronavirus-unemployment-philippines-migrant-workers/2020/09/09/37972290-e688-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html)

<sup>2</sup> See Abu Al-Rasheed Tanggol, “Challenging the Narrative of Filipino Resiliency,” *Rappler* (November 18, 2020), <https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/opinion-challenging-narrative-filipino-resiliency>

<sup>3</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “The New People Next Door,” *Lausanne Occasional Paper*, no. 55 (September 29 to October 5, 2004), Pattaya, Thailand, [https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP55\\_IG26.pdf](https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP55_IG26.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> An earlier study on Filipino Migrant Cyberchurch was published by Brazal and Odchigüe. See Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston and Agnes Brazal, eds., “Cyberchurch and the Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East,” in *Church in the Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body* (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

*CFC-ANCOP Brussels Chapter and Athens's Miraculous Medal Migrant Center) as a response to the Signs of the Times, a modality of being a church that has provided more participative leverage for the Filipino laity in terms of leadership in the context of contemporary ecclesiology and missiology. Thus, a renewed appreciation of lay participation will be highlighted and analyzed in this scholarly endeavor as these "accidental missionaries, armed with their ordinary theology"<sup>5</sup> and popular spirituality, take on a more active role in church-building via cyberspace in their attempt to fill up an ecclesiological and liturgical lacuna courtesy of the pandemic. Hence, this is not only a powerful example of lay Filipino missiology but also an invaluable witness to the ecclesiological maxim, "Ecclesia semper reformanda est."*

## **INTRODUCTION**

2020 was a year like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to its knees. Every niche of contemporary society was penetrated. No less than the World Economic Forum has affirmed its "unprecedented impact on mobility"<sup>6</sup> which, according to the International Labor Organization, has occasioned the drastic deterioration of the quantity and quality of the so-called Labor Market Outcomes.<sup>7</sup> No doubt, this has proven to be a horrifying nightmare for countless Filipinos in the diaspora. The pandemic has not only led to the closure of international borders but also of places of worship, which have served as the "home away from home" for most Filipino migrants worldwide. All of a sudden, their "hybrid" liturgical and social gatherings that proved to be a vital element in their diasporic survival have been unceremoniously put to a halt.

Nevertheless, Filipino migrants are not hailed as "God's secret weapon" by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization for

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<sup>5</sup> See. Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> John Letzing, "How COVID-19 is Throttling Vital Migration Flows;" *World Economic Forum* (April 8, 2020), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-is-throttling-vital-migration-flows/>

<sup>7</sup> Preliminary ILO estimates indicate a rise in global unemployment of between 5.3 million ("low" scenario) and 24.7 million ("high" scenario) from a base level of 188 million in 2019. The "mid" scenario suggests an increase of 13 million (7.4 million in high-income countries). *International Labour Organization, Covid-19 and the World of Work: Impact and Policy Response*, March 18, 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/dgreports/dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_738753.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/dgreports/dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_738753.pdf)

nothing.<sup>8</sup> Their resiliency and expression of faith have continued to shine brightly amid the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Like a pliant bamboo tree, they have adapted and found ways to continue their religious devotions and charitable efforts. Momentarily, like seasoned diasporic agents, they “seamlessly” migrated from a physical church to a cyberchurch, a feat that is initiated and sustained by the ordinary Filipino migrants themselves. Church life among Filipino (im)migrants in the Western Hemisphere continues to thrive amid the dreaded COVID-19 contagion. This is especially seen in Brussels and Athens which shall be the focus of the current study. This is a fitting tribute to the celebration of *Missio Ad Gentes* Year of the Church in the Philippines in view of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Christianization of the Philippine archipelago.

Despite restrictions in mobility, Filipino migrants in Brussels and Athens have found ways to organize and supervise religious activities using social media and technology. Virtual prayer sessions, evangelizing, and reaching out to those gravely affected by the pandemic have transformed many into “accidental missionaries.”

It is against the backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Philippine Christianity’s quincennial celebration, therefore, that I shall explore a possible trajectory of contemporary “cyberchurches” courtesy of Filipino (im)migrants, especially in Brussels and Athens, which I believe to be providential in nature.

At the outset, I must inform the readers that this endeavor does not promise to deliver an in-depth critical exploration or examination of the reality of cyberchurches, but instead, its main aim is to present a simple exposition of how cyberchurches are carving their niches in the realm of contemporary ecclesiology and missiology. This article is an initial attempt to give an account of a relatively recent unfolding of a new modality of being a church that Filipino migrants have made use of as they continue to perform their ministry as “accidental missionaries” gifted with providential creativity or serendipitous adaptability/flexibility.

## GENERAL PROFILE OF FILIPINO MIGRANTS

To provide a glimpse of the actual state of the Filipino migrants’ involvement in Western European ecclesial life, allow me to share some

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<sup>8</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “A New Vision, a New Heart and a Renewed Call,” Lausanne Occasional Paper, no. 55 (September 29 to October 5, 2004), Pattaya, Thailand.

<sup>9</sup> Without sweeping under the rug, however, the tendency to use this as an excuse to absolve the civil leaders of their accountability and responsibility.

information I gathered from a survey I conducted in view of my doctoral dissertation that I defended in 2018. The data is based on the ten open-ended questions distributed to 400 Filipino migrants in the cities of Antwerp, Brussels, Ieper, Amsterdam, Nice, Athens, and Barcelona. Out of the original survey forms distributed, I was able to gather 77 responses. Their initial answers were verified through a personal interview I conducted with them. The result may not give us a complete picture, but I do believe that, somehow, we can get an insight into how they participate in Catholic ecclesial life in Western Europe.

It is interesting to note that the majority of these Filipino migrants are composed of an impressively young workforce whose age ranges from 21 to 45 years old and of whom 80 percent are women.<sup>10</sup> While most of them are armed with college degrees and are highly skilled, their jobs are usually not commensurate with their educational attainment or aptitude level. This reflects their determination to escape the financial insecurity that they experienced in the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of Filipino migrants is also felt in almost every corner of the global village.<sup>12</sup> Others refer to them humorously as

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<sup>10</sup> Ildefonso Bagasao, "Filipinos in Europe: Economic Contributions, Challenges and Aspirations," in *The Olde Worlde: Views of Filipino Migrants in Europe*, Filomenita Mongaya Hoegsholm, ed. (Philippine Migration Research Network (PMRN) and Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), 2007), 30. It must be noted that, in addition to the countries aforementioned, smaller pockets of Filipinos are living in other countries of the European Union and in Scandinavia.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Formal migration to the European Continent began in the 1960's, prompted by Europe's need to recover from the war years and for the expansion of health sector and tourist industry. As of 2005, according to the Commission on Filipino Migrant Workers (CFMW), an Amsterdam-based NGO, approximately 824,419. See Filomenita Mongaya Høgsholm, "Babaylan-Denmark: The Philippine Women Network in Europe," review of *In de Olde Worlde: Views of Filipino Migrants in Europe*, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.babaylan.dk/index.php/in-de-olde-worlde-views-of-filipino-migrants-in-europe/>. See also Gerardo P. Sicut, "Filipino Labor Migration," *The Philippine Star*; September 12, 2012, <http://www.philstar.com/business/2012-09-12/847951/filipino-labor-migration>. According to Andrew Geddes, author of several books on European Migration, "in Europe where the influx of immigrants from the so-called 'developing' countries (including the Philippines) has increased dramatically beginning 1980." Christina Boswell and Andrew Geddes, *Migration and Mobility in the European Union* (Great Britain: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2011), 4. See also Mary Grace T. Betsayda, "*Bahala Na Ang Dios*" ("Leave it to God"): *The Church's*

omnipresent as God since they are literally everywhere! But mere presence does not translate to increased value. A Filipino author laments the “erasure” of Filipino narratives from both American and world historiography.<sup>13</sup> On this note, Ambassador Victoria Bataclan once remarked on how the publication of *In de Olde Worlde* served as a remediation of the apparent lack of interest in the impact of Filipino migrants in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Despite occasional recognitions and accolades given to some global “*kababayans*,” especially the health workers who figure prominently in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipinos are still generally invisible in the international landscape.<sup>15</sup>

In the area of ecclesiology and missiology, Filipino migrants may have embedded themselves, especially in the U.S.A, since they’ve

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*Role in the Socialization of Filipinos in the Greater Toronto Area* (Saarbrücken, Deutschland: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Emily Noelle Ignacio, *Building Diaspora: Filipino Community Formation on the Internet* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University, 2005), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Bataclan, *In de Olde World: Views of Filipino Migrants in Europe* (Quezon City: Philippine Social Science Council, 2007), 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> During the celebration of the Filipino American Month, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City, delivered a powerful message to honor the Filipino workers in the U.S.: More than a quarter of immigrant nurses in the country come from the Philippines. “So it’s no exaggeration to say we literally would not have survived the COVID-19 pandemic without all of you, our Filipino brothers and sisters. I ask all New Yorkers to join me in celebrating the culture and contributions of our Filipino community. You keep our city moving forward, and you keep us progressing during one of the greatest challenges of our time. Thank you for protecting us. See. US Philippines Society; “NYC Mayor de Blasio Message: Filipino American History Month of October, *US-Philippine Society*, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.usphsociety.org/2020/10/28/nyc-mayor-de-blasio-message-filipino-american-history-month-of-october/>. Definitely, the same appreciation is echoed in the other parts of the globe for, as noted by Gonzales, “The high performing economies of Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, United Kingdom, and Italy would not be possible without double-income productivity from families. Filipino migrants in these countries provide the necessary child-care and household cleaning to allow mothers and fathers to both seek gainful employment.” Perhaps, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that they are one of the backbones of world economy. In fact, Gonzales vies that their economic power is immense.” Joaquin Jay Gonzales III, *Filipino American Faith in Action: Immigration, Religion and Civic Engagement* (New York and London: New York University, 2009), 32.

embraced the church as their “home away from home.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that their remarkable input in contemporary ecclesiology and missiology in the former center of the Christian world is still not given due appreciation. This is even if the Filipino Cardinal, His Eminence Luis Antonio Tagle, is now a formidable global ecclesiastical brand of which Filipinos can be proud.

Speaking of the “undervaluation” of Filipino ecclesiological input, the respondents in the survey I conducted shared the following pieces of information:<sup>17</sup>

- 1) Their stay in Europe as factory workers, housekeepers, babysitters, hotel supervisors, administrators, accountants, dental assistants, receptionists, caregivers, and teachers ranges from 1 to 10 years (11-40 for some);
- 2) Most of them have been involved in their local parish communities for approximately 10 years as community coordinators, council members, lectors, choir members, catechists, collectors, and Extraordinary Ministers of the Holy Eucharist;
- 3) Their greatest joy includes meeting fellow Filipino members, sharing or serving, strong commitment/dedication, unity, praying, loving, and respect;
- 4) Their greatest frustration is the lack of commitment of others, their lack of unity, gossiping among their members, and tardiness in their common activities;
- 5) They wish that their local parish community will have unity, accepting of individual differences, actively engage in their mission, grow in number and spirit, and have their own Filipino chaplaincy or parish;

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, the difference between the respective input of Filipinos in US and Western Europe lies in their access to high paying white-collared jobs.

<sup>17</sup> Rowan Rebutillo, “Sambayanihan: From Economic Migration to Soft-Power Evangelization; towards a Trans-Disciplinary and Trans-Colonial Inquiry into the Impact of Filipino Catholic Communities in Diaspora” (Dissertation, Faculty of Theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. 2018), 493-497. A version of this portion shall appear also in a yet to be released article entitled “Toward *Sambayanihan*: A Filipino Ecclesiology of Migration,” *Catholicism in Migration and Diaspora: Cross-Border Filipino Perspectives* (Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations Series of Routledge: London).

- 6) The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is a source of comfort and hope, a way to become closer to God, the highest form of prayer, a source of joy, solemnity, and inspiration;
- 7) Genuine inculturation for them entails the use of the Filipino language, celebrations presided by Filipino priests, and the use of Filipino songs;
- 8) For them the impact of Filipino communities includes being shining examples of hospitality, hopefulness, love, unity, creativity, and heartfelt service;
- 9) Undesirable traits of Filipino communities include passivity, the fusion of perceived negative European traits, jealousy, competition, lack of unity and “crab-mentality,” and gossiping); and
- 10) They suggest that both the local community and the Filipino community must be more accepting and tolerant, open-minded and less judgmental, helpful toward each other, develop a strong sense of participation and conduct a regular formation program.

They also believe that active participation in their parishes/dioceses can help assist and support fellow migrants regardless of cultural backgrounds. They envision Filipino communities someday being models of missionary communities.

Most of them may have been arguably on the fringes of the European ecclesiastical framework, which is fraught with agnosticism or the “eclipse of God.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, they are still able to breathe new life into the almost dried bones of Christianity as they, together with the other migrants from the so-called Global South, have been filling the empty pews abandoned by the former local occupants.<sup>19</sup> Thus, their contribution

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<sup>18</sup> According to the 2010 Eurobarometer survey there is an average of 51% who stated among the EU citizens that they “believe that there is a God”, while 26% noted that they “believe there is some sort of spirit or life force,” 20% said they “don’t believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force,” and 3% did not give an answer. In a study that was done by Dogan. it was mentioned that 47% of the French people veered towards agnosticism as of 2003. See Mattei Dogan, “Religious Beliefs in Europe: Factors of Accelerated Decline,” in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 14, eds. Ralph L. Piedmont and David O. Moberg, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003):161-188.

<sup>19</sup> For sure, some Filipinos are also infected by the “eclipse of God”, but a great number of them still consider the church as an essential aspect of their life. Externally, at least, this reality is expressed clearly in how the Filipino (im)migrant families decorate their houses. Almost always they devote a certain spot in their homes for their religious images and devotional item, which they call “altar’.

is something that cannot be summarily concealed,<sup>20</sup> especially because, according to Gonzales, Filipino migrants are armed with “soft-power diplomacy” and “adaptive spirits... [that] allow them to transcend the acculturative stress caused by the complexities of migrant life.”<sup>21</sup> Gonzales, moreover, avers that Filipinos “are valued for their respectful English communication skills (*marunong makiusap*), [being] responsible (*responsable*), cheerful disposition (*masayahin*), industriousness (*sipag*), ability to blend in and be a team player (*marunong makisama at lumaro*), creative abilities (*maabilidad*), easily trained or taught (*madaling turuan*), as well as their can-do (*kaya natin ito*) and never-say-never (*susubukan ko po*) attitudes, among others.”<sup>22</sup>

Filipino (im)migrant workers have been hailed for several decades now as “*bagong bayani*.” I believe, however, that they are not only “*bagong bayani*” but also potential missionaries via the introduction of their most cherished traditions into the Catholic parishes in the West. At present Filipino traditional devotions, such as the *Simbang Gabi*, are being celebrated in the major parishes in Western Europe. Pope Francis even presided over this “advent devotion” in Rome in the first years of his pontificate.

They are indeed “vaccinating” the Western World with a faith that is substantially Filipino. In fact, Rev. Patrick Lynch, Auxiliary Bishop of Southwark - England, as if directly affirming what Gonzales has identified as the distinct contribution of Filipino migrants, commended the “deep faith” and “commitment to the family and loyalty to the Church” of the Filipino migrants.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Although, Saskia Sassen, a well-known scholar on globalization and migration, has downplayed the significance of the Filipino Catholic migrants for, according to him, they are “simply blending in with mainstream... Catholicism,” Gonzales contends, however that, it appears so because their initial attitude, especially when they have no choice, is to “feel the atmosphere” (*pakikiramdaman muna*) until they have gained a certain level of leverage where they can already infuse their own ideas and ways of doing things. When they see an opening, unbeknownst to many, they start infusing Filipino flavor to the local communities until they have, using their “diplomatic charm”, established their solid base. Slowly but surely, Filipinos bring into the ecclesial community “their own iconography, music pieces, singing styles, language, homilies, liturgies, priests, nuns, saints, practices, food, drinks, celebrations, holy days, devotions, groups, and reading materials into church leadership, bible studies, and mass content.” Gonzales, *Filipino American*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.



Many times, however, Filipinos are not appreciated for their real worth because they appear to be “submissive” and “too weak to influence” the mainstream. Nevertheless, beneath that superficial “weakness” lies what I would like to call “subversive subservience.” In a subtle and inconspicuous way, they assert themselves and infuse Filipino flavor in Western European societal and ecclesial landscapes. Somehow, the notion of “subversive subservience” belongs to the same sphere as the “tactics of the weak”<sup>24</sup> explored by Cueto in his theological appropriation of Michel De Certeau’s “practice of daily life.”

Interestingly, this tactic includes, but is not limited to, the sphere of gastronomy. People are indoctrinated through their “gastronomic miracles.” According to Gonzales, these “sensory enticements” are, indeed, “effective missionary tools”.<sup>25</sup> Prayer and palate seem to work.

Missionary impact goes beyond liturgy, food, and culture. They have also made their presence and voices felt in both the civic and political spheres. I have been a witness to the many noble endeavors of these “diaspora diplomats” in Europe, as also observed by Gonzales, in the area of charity and social justice.<sup>26</sup> No wonder, John Paul II expressed his conviction that Filipino (im)migrants can serve as a wonderful example for other Catholic faithful.<sup>27</sup> Of course, this is not to canonize the Filipino migrants as if they are incapable of doing what is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. See Victorino Cueto, “Tactics of the Weak: A Critical Appropriation of Everyday Resistance with Michel de Certeau. Towards a Theology of Everyday Life,” (unpublished dissertation, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Joaquin Jay Gonzales III, *Diaspora Diplomacy: Philippine Migration and Its Soft Power Influences* (Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2012), 56-58.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 114. Gonzales recounts that Filipino (im)migrants “1) Play a role in public diplomacy alongside nation state efforts particularly in spreading knowledge about Philippine culture which achieved mutual benefits for country of origin and country of destination or immigration; 2) Act not only as diplomats, but as missionaries – spreading and influencing the practice of faith and religion in close to 200 countries; 3) Earn money while transferring business, technical, service and other skills to recipient states which, in turn, allow them to send back money not only for family necessities but nation state needs, thus reducing dependency from foreign aid and foreign investments; and 4) Infuse much-needed social, spiritual, organizational, and civic diversity into the multicultural ethnoscape of global cities and communities supplementing existing ones and replenishing what has been lost.” Ibid., 246.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 134.

## **BAHALA NA ‘ORDINARY THEOLOGY’: A FILIPINO MIGRANT’S VEHICLE FOR EVANGELIZATION<sup>28</sup>**

### **Unpacking Ordinary Theology**

It is my firm belief that Filipino migrants are gifted with a distinct brand of faith and a way of making sense of their faith (God-talk) that makes them resilient in the face of challenges. I call it their *Bahala Na* Ordinary Theology. Armed with this, they do not only “infect” the world with their distinct way of theologizing but, also, they can cope with the challenges posed by the contemporary world, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and find new “spaces” for the fellowship and worship.

The phrase “ordinary theology” has been used by Jeff Astley to refer to the “unofficial”<sup>29</sup> theology and theologizing of Christians located outside the niche of the academy that validly expresses the “fundamental theological dimension of every Christian’s vocation.”<sup>30</sup> He derives this usage from the 1996 edition of the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of an “ordinary person” - someone “without exceptional experience or expert knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> Hence, ordinary theology is “the theological beliefs and process of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Largely similar versions of this appeared in the Advanced MA Thesis in Theology and Religious Studies and PhD Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2013 and 2018, respectively. An article on this topic was published under the title “BAHALA NA: In Search of an “Ordinary Theology” for the Filipino Diaspora” in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 1-19.

<sup>29</sup> Astley claims that this kind of theology is “routinely ignored by academic Christian theology.” See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate., 2002).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Interestingly, this “brand” of theology is implied in Wainwright’s understanding of theology which gives premium to the “reflective enterprise that both feeds on and intends to serve the primary manifestations and deliverances of Christian faith that occur as revelation, narration, proclamation and worship.” See Geoffrey Wainwright, “Method in Theology,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 369. See also Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 52.

Despite all the suspicions surrounding “ordinary theology”, its nagging presence and invaluable contribution to the doctrines of the Church cannot be simply ignored. John Hull, Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, in my analysis, is expressing the same thought when he asserted that “if theology is what goes on in people’s lives, we know amazingly little about Christian theology.”<sup>33</sup> Simply said, one-sided academics miss out on something precious and pertinent here. Definitely, “valid” theologies are not only “conjured” in the confines of the university or within the walls of some canonically sanctioned theological institutions, but also in the context of normal everyday life. Daniel Pilario’s theology from “rough grounds of praxis,”<sup>34</sup> for me, traverses the same stream as that of ordinary theology because it identifies ordinary life and living of people as the *locus theologicus* as it veers away from the straightjacket imposed by “crystalline purity of logic”<sup>35</sup>

Astley insists, however, that this alternative route provided by ordinary theology is not necessarily diametrically opposed to “official theology.” It simply presents openness to the wider scope of theology and to the “real” ground of theologizing in contrast to the “artificial” and “detached” world created in the academe. Ordinary theology is characterized by the following notions: *learned and learning*;<sup>36</sup> *tentative and*

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<sup>33</sup> John Hull, *North England Institute for Christian Education (NEICE) Symposium* (July 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Ground of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu* (Leuven, Belgium: University of Leuven, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 107.

<sup>36</sup> It is learned, because it is never a product of “*creatio-ex-nihilo*” as it also arises from the crumbs that fall from the table of Academic theology. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 59. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 107.

significant;<sup>37</sup> meaningful;<sup>38</sup> subterranean;<sup>39</sup> religious;<sup>40</sup> kneeling and celebratory;<sup>41</sup> irregular dogmatics;<sup>42</sup> mother-tongue;<sup>43</sup> and onlook.<sup>44</sup> Surrounded by all these features, ordinary theology only differs from normative/official academic theology in terms of degrees. Thus, it still belongs to the theology of the Church whose membership is dominated by people who have received little or no scholarly theological education. Prof. Jacques Haers, in a personal conversation with him, claims that Astley is still too cautious

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<sup>37</sup> The fact that it continues to develop means that it is always partial. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> It brings meaning to its 'practitioners' because, according to Astley, "ordinary theology is more directly concerned with the perceived meaningfulness of the speaker's own life than that of the theology in the academy." *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>39</sup> It is referred to as such, because it is not readily apparent, especially in the academic or clerical circles, but it is freely "fermented" in the humble regions of ordinary life (i.e., pubs, market-places, bingo halls, or bus queues). *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Its "religiosity" originates from its closeness or, as Astley puts it, its "sharing in the salvific nature of religious and spiritual life from which it springs." Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 73.

<sup>41</sup> It is opposed to the "sitting theology." Balthasar distinguishes 'kneeling theology' or 'theology at prayer' from 'sitting theology' or 'theology at the desk. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Verbum Caro*, I (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannesverlag, 1960), 224; in English as *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Due (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 208. Because it incorporates 'the, more or less, immediate cognitive articulation of living piety' which is a characteristic of the kneeling theology." Astley argues that "for ordinary theologians, their kneeling God-talk also incorporates the deepest value conviction on which they rest their lives and their deaths." Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> It is considered as such, because it is distilled through the personal biographies of its authors who are not "academically critical and meticulous" in forming theological concepts that, admittedly, can be volatile at times. *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Although the use of gender-based qualifiers in contrasting academic and ordinary theology may not sound appealing to some, it should be considered valid, because it is articulated in "concrete narrative and personal ways of thinking" normally associated with women. For him, academic theology is like "men, who tend to be more distanced in their God-talk: more analytic, speculative, 'cool' and detached." *Ibid.*, 77-82 for more discussions on mother-tongue theology.

<sup>44</sup> In the words of Astley, "it is replete with expressions of 'onlooks' and 'experiencing-as' of this kind, directed to events, individuals and situations that are viewed as freighted with religious meaning." See also Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Theological Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963), 125. For Astley (*Ordinary Theology*, 83) "onlooks express our feelings and our behavioral intentions towards it."

because Haers argues that if theology has no connection to the experiences and thoughts of the ordinary, then, it is not genuine theology.<sup>45</sup>

### Relating *Bahala na* to ‘Ordinary Theology’

The Filipino expression “*bahala na*” captures the essence of Filipino *pananampalataya* (faith) which embodies the notion of ordinary theology. Contrary to an outsider’s reading of *bahala na* as fatalistic and defeatist, Jocano informs us that *bahala na* encourages a positive outlook for it allows one to access one’s inherent capabilities and to strengthen faith and trust in God who is merciful and gracious, which is expressed in a very popular Filipino adage: *Nasa Diyos ang awa; nasa tao ang gawa* (Mercy is God’s prerogative; work is human being’s responsibility). Hence, if one combines profound faith and trust in God with unrelenting perseverance, he/she will definitely be able to overcome any tribulations or seemingly impossible tasks laid set before him/her.<sup>46</sup> Thus, a person who says *bahala na* almost always finds a way to resolve a seemingly insurmountable crisis and ends up at least surviving, if not actually thriving. Of course, whether the solution one has devised is morally right or not, is another part of the story.

It becomes negative when it is used as a scapegoat or an excuse for irresponsibility.<sup>47</sup> *Bahala na* can either be positive or negative, depending on how it is being used, as I have discussed in the previous paragraphs. On the one hand, it is positive if *bahala na* is used as a brief period of discernment to eventually gain strength and momentum to address (with the grace of God) the precariousness of the situation, and

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<sup>45</sup> Conversation took place on November 25, 2014. This does not deny the fact that “ordinary theology” is still and must be subjected to constant scrutiny, criticism, and revision to ensure its survival.

<sup>46</sup> By so doing, one’s self-worth is enhanced by allowing the daring spirit to surface and to move a person to trust in his or her capability and responsibility. See Jocano, F. Landa. *Filipino Prehistory: Rediscovering Precolonial Heritage*, (Metro Manila: PUNLAD, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> One must be critically aware, according to Gorospe, that “in the past, the negative aspect of *bahala na* which dominated Filipino life, meant a false sense of resignation (*ganyan lang ang buhay* [life is simply like that]), a superstitious belief or blind faith (*malas/swerte, tadhana, kapalaran* [misfortune/luck, destiny]), or escape from decision-making and social responsibility. See Vitaliano Gorospe, S.J., “Understanding the Filipino Value System,” in *Values in Philippines Culture and Education*, ed. Manuel B. Dy (Washington D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 62-69. Brackets are mine.

the uncertainty of the consequences, given the limited choices at hand. On the other hand, it is negative if *bahala na* is merely expressed as words devoid of action, because it does not solve the issue at stake, but rather prolongs, complicates, and even aggravates the agony.

I argue, therefore, that as an expression of ordinary theology, *bahala na* as embodied by the Filipino migrants is an “articulation of faith” rooted in the narrative of struggles and resilience of the diasporized Filipinos who lack academic training in theology. It is also a *learned* and *learning* theology because it has *grown* to be intrinsically linked with the “Filipino soul”<sup>48</sup> while at the same time, it is also “in construction” as it continues to adapt to migration and globalization changes. Thus, it is significant and meaningful for Filipino migrants,<sup>49</sup> although, because of its subterranean nature, it is shunned or seldom articulated by people who are well-versed in official Catholic doctrines. Moreover, it has a subversive bent that allows them to “transform” the “meaning”<sup>50</sup> of the venue and the form of worship in the “belly of the Empire”<sup>51</sup> as Filipinos continue to vaccinate the Western churches with a potent dose of Filipino

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<sup>48</sup> Betsayda’s argument is particularly instructive here: “in the case of Filipinos, because religion has been in place in the culture for so long, it becomes something associated with ‘being Filipino’ itself... because of colonization, Roman Catholicism has become so intrinsically linked with the Philippines to the extent that they cannot be separated.” Betsayda, “*Bahala Na Ang Dios*,” 49 -50.

<sup>49</sup> *Bahala Na* theology captures, most especially, the devotions so close to the hearts of the Filipinos, like the *Black Nazarene* (the image of the “black” Suffering Christ carrying the cross) that is celebrated every first Friday of the month and January 9 each year, the *Sto. Niño* (Infant Jesus) that is celebrated every third Sunday of January, and the *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* that is celebrated every Wednesday in the Philippines. All these, including the devotions to Our Lady of Penafrancia, Our Lady of Manaoag, and other Marian devotions continue to attract millions of devotees every year on their respective feast days.

<sup>50</sup> It is manifested in how Filipinos “transform” the churches from primarily being a place of worship, to a venue for creating social and cultural capital that “enable them to thrive spiritually, socially and economically. Betsayda, “*Bahala Na Ang Dios*,” 20-21. Betsayda cites in her book the result of two case studies in San Francisco, California: their studies “examine how Filipinos are bringing back social capital to the fabric of American society through the churches they have taken over, from declining congregations, or established on their own. It also shows how they blend Filipino cultural practices and beliefs to create new and stronger sociocultural capital. Finally, it analyzes the transnational nature of sociocultural capital spread globally through the Filipino diaspora.” See *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> See Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest from Greece to Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 70.

religiosity that can possibly become “foundations to structural transformation”<sup>52</sup> that manifest “flashes in the pan”<sup>53</sup> that re-direct the course of history, “the collective swell of countless muffled voices”<sup>54</sup> or the “emergent voices”<sup>55</sup> that burst the hegemonic bubble.

Strongly influenced by the person and the biography of its authors, *Bahala Na* as ordinary theology belongs to the “irregular dogmatics.” It is spoken in the context of the concrete narrative and personal ways of thinking, articulating the struggles and joys personally experienced by the Filipino migrants themselves within the rough ground of praxis. By that, it is an “on look” theology that arises from the real experiences of Filipinos in the diaspora directed to events, individuals, and situations that are viewed as freighted with religious meaning.<sup>56</sup> On that note, Maria Pilar Aquino comes to mind who claims that “in the daily life of people reside the values and categories on which social consensus is based.”<sup>57</sup>

Because it is an “on-look” theology, it can be easily dismissed as unsystematic. Paul Holmer helps us argue against this criticism: “The truth is that the language of faith is not an artificial and contrived tongue.”<sup>58</sup> Technical and artificial theologies create a ‘play world’<sup>59</sup> of special

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<sup>52</sup> See Pilario, “Back to the Rough Grounds,” 45.

<sup>53</sup> Marc Bloch, *French Rural History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970), 170.

<sup>54</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith, vol 1, Religion and Postmodern Series (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1972), 105. Originally published as *La Fable Mystique. XVIe –XVIIeSiede.* n.p., Editions Gallimard, 1982. Cited in Cueto, “*Tactics of the Weak*,” 244.

<sup>55</sup> Pilario, “Back to the Rough Grounds,” 38.

<sup>56</sup> This is reminiscent of what Barth said about “‘free dogmatics’ that existed first, but that it continues *alongside* the more academic mode of theology, which has ‘always had its origin in irregular dogmatics and could never have existed without its stimulus and co-operation.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1, no.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975): 3.

<sup>57</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, “The Collective Discovery of our Own Power,” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, eds. Ada Maria Asasi-Diaz and Fernando Segovia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 257.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 199.

<sup>59</sup> Against the grain of the disciplined, sophisticated, systematic and coherent theologizing flaunted by the academic theologians, Pilario claims that “intellectual activity appears to be a serious enterprise yet, in fact, it is also a game - a ‘playworld’ where people can tune in to the ‘as if’ or ‘let’s pretend’ mode without real life-and-

vocabularies that are normally incomprehensible for ‘ordinary’ speakers of the language of faith.<sup>60</sup> Along this line, I believe that Edward Schillebeeckx, in *Christ: The Human Story of God*, agrees with Holmer when the former underlines that “talking in the language of faith about the actions of God in history has an experiential basis in a very particular human activity in the world and history. For there is no other basis for human talk about God’s transcendence than our “contingency’, i.e., our limitations – our changeable, precarious human history.”<sup>61</sup> This certainly is reminiscent of Isasi-Diaz’s comprehension of (*la tela*, literally cloth), which is about seeing and comprehending the “stuff” of reality within and from a particular vantage point: “One sees the world, never, with pristine eyes.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, like *lo cotidiano*, *Bahala na* theology as an expression of holistic embodied faith does not find comfort in the abstract.

*Bahala na* theology that embodies the God-talk of Filipinos in the diaspora can, thus, be conceived as a true reflection of the Tagalog notion of faith, which is *pananampalataya* combining “foretaste” and “risk-taking.” It also captures the essence of the popular Filipino adage: *Nasa Diyos ang awa; Nasa tao ang gawa* (Mercy is God’s prerogative; Work is a human’s responsibility). Definitely, it speaks of the love of the Filipinos to celebrate liturgies amidst the different struggles. They consider the Church as a vital part of their life, because the Church, for them, is an extension of self, a home, and a way to salvation.

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death stakes that beset the rough grounds of praxis – as epitomized by the ancient philosopher, Thales, who fell into a pit because he was always looking up, engrossed with the stars.” Pilario, “Back to the Rough Grounds,” 35.

<sup>60</sup> See Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith*, 199.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 8.

<sup>62</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 66. Cueto’s understanding of the epistemological framework of *lo cotidiano* is particularly instructive here: As an epistemological framework, *lo cotidiano* signifies Latinas’ ‘capacity to know’ and explicate ‘the features of their knowing’ which, in turn, indicates their attempts at understanding and expressing ‘how and why their lives are the way they are, and how and why they function as they do. See also Cueto, “*Tactics of the Weak*,” 267-68.



## HISTORY AND IMPACT OF CYBERCHURCH

Before delving into the concept of the “cyberchurch,” it is necessary to mention first what the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Media of Social Communications* says about the inherent right of the Church “to announce the Good News of salvation also with the help of the media of social communication and to instruct men [sic] in their proper use.”<sup>63</sup> This certainly spells the Church’s positive regard for the use of modern means of communication in evangelization and church-building. Thus, it follows that many members of the Church have taken the liberty to create avenues for possible “marriage” between ecclesiology/missiology and the world wide web.

The confluence of church life and the internet has been in existence for approximately 3 decades now. The use of the internet for religious purposes can be traced back to the 1980s as documented by Rheingold. Initially, it appeared in the Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), according to Rheingold, “under a create your own heading on the discussion area of Communi Tree,”<sup>64</sup> which later on evolved into a sophisticated platform that provided religious practitioners with new ways to explore religious beliefs and experiences through a growing number of web sites, chat rooms, and email discussion groups dedicated to a variety of faith-related issues: an online gathering of religious information, online worship and rituals, online recruitment, and missionary activities, and online religious communities.

The word “cyberchurch” has been in circulation for more than two decades now.<sup>65</sup> Patrick Dixon, one of the more popular proponents of this concept, has been using this term since the publication of his book

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<sup>63</sup> The Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Media of Social Communications (*Inter mirifica*)” (December 4, 1963), no. 3, *Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. James H. Kroeger, (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), 386. Hereafter referred to as *IM*.

<sup>64</sup> The internet has grown from 1000 to 10 million users over the last 25 years. Since 1993 computer networks have grabbed enormous public attention. These computer networks create new places of assembly. It is called the cyber community (Virtual community, online or Net community). See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1993), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Cyber church was previously called the ‘internet church’. The term ‘internet church’ or ‘internet highway church’ has turned into ‘online church.’ See James Paulraj, *Church for All: Problems and Prospects of Cyber Church*, (First Kindle Edition: 2017). Hereafter will be referred as Church for all.

'*Cyber church: Christianity and the Internet*' in 1997. Cyber church (or cyber-church) has been defined, from a ministry perspective, as enabling "worship and Christian education, evangelization, and community on the World Wide Web."<sup>66</sup> It may or may not be linked to a concrete local church or denomination and need not be engaged in all these ministries. It is distinguished from the simple web pages of churches by its interactive nature and intent to form relationships among members<sup>67</sup>

As per Barna Research Group's "Cyber Church Report" (2001), 100 million Americans make use of the internet for some aspects of religious experiences.<sup>68</sup> Several religious communities (i.e., parishes, religious orders, spiritual communities, and the like) have adapted the concept of cyberchurch in various forms and extents. My studies reveal that the main bulk of these communities comes from non-Catholic traditions. Although, the current pandemic has "forced" Catholic communities to migrate to the virtual sphere even temporarily, as a response to the signs of the time and to ensure that the religious/spiritual needs of their members are still delivered to them, especially in these most trying times.

On the part of the Catholic Church, our current Pope, in my own appreciation, no doubt exhibits amiability towards the use of social media as manifested by his use of *Twitter* and *Instagram*, apart from the televised and live-streamed activities in the Vatican. In his *Encyclical Letter on Faith*, he laid down his vision of faith that "needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Toledowiki.net, "Cyber-Church," <http://toledowiki.net/cyber-church> [accessed April 2014]. The term "cyberchurch" (without a hyphen) was first used to refer to "an electronically linked group of believers aiming to reproduce in cyberspace aspects of conventional church life." It was also used to refer to "the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks." Cyberchurches in this sense have no link to a concrete institutional structure. See Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch, Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1997), 17.

<sup>68</sup> Today, nearly nine in 10 pastors say they believe it is theologically acceptable for a church to provide faith assistance or religious experiences to people through the Internet (87%). This is up from about three-quarters of pastors in 2000 (78%). Similarly, nearly nine in 10 pastors today say they think people in their area would find it acceptable for their church to provide faith assistance or religious experiences to people through the Internet (86%), compared to only seven in 10 who would have said so in 2000.

proportionate to what is communicated.”<sup>69</sup> This position of Pope Francis echoes the document issued by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 2002 entitled “The Church and Internet” which acknowledges the value of the internet in the life of contemporary Christians: “although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users.”<sup>70</sup>

Several people have voiced their concern, even their opposition, to the emergence of cyberchurches. One of them is Scott McKnight. In a foreword, he wrote for the book *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places and Things in the Digital Age* passionately expressed his insistence on the prominence of the “Analog Church” as opposed to the digital versions of it. He surmises:

If Jesus is God incarnate, then God chose to reveal himself in analog, not digital. You can communicate a message in words and send such a message on paper/papyrus, but you can't see the revelation of God except in that one person—

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<sup>69</sup> Francis, *Encyclical Letter on Faith (Lumen fidei)*, June 29, 2013, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 40. Hereafter referred to as *LF*. Certainly, the foundational document that sets the motion of adaptation of modern means of communication in the proclamation of the Faith is *Inter Mirifica* which was written in 1963. This document, however, cautioned the People of God that while the Church is promoting its use, it also “recognizes... that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss.” (*IM*, 2). It also instructs the faithful “to instill a human and Christian spirit into these media, so that they many fully measure up to the great expectations of mankind and to God’s design.” (*IM*, 3) Moreover, it exhorted that “proper and decent” communication of the message must be employed while remaining within the “bounds of justice and charity” (*IM*, 4) for the “The Council proclaims that all must hold to the absolute primacy of the objective moral order, that is, this order by itself surpasses and fittingly coordinates all other spheres of human affairs—the arts not excepted—even though they be endowed with notable dignity.” (*IM*, 5)

<sup>70</sup> See John P. Foley, “The Church and Internet,” Pontifical Council Document, February 2, 2002 (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Social Communications), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_p\\_c\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_p_c_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html)

the person who lived, who died on a cross, who was raised,  
who ascended, who rules, and who will come again.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, for him, “Analog Church provides an analog ecclesiology that conforms to the incarnation itself.”<sup>72</sup> With that in mind, I consider Cardinal Tagle as expressing the same stance held by McKnight. Although, grateful for the advances in technology that made liturgical celebrations and Bible study programs via the internet possible, Cardinal Tagle, in his message on 2021 World Mission Sunday, reminds us that “we are corporeal beings, we need contact.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, he calls on the church to develop other types of intelligence that will provide alternatives to the artificial or virtual intelligence that the young people of today have grown accustomed to. In this regard, it is my conviction that Cardinal Tagle does not categorically reject the contribution of cyberchurches to contemporary ecclesiology. He simply wants to put this “new” ecclesiological development in its proper place. In that way, he differs from McKnight’s point of view. My position, certainly, does not deviate from this view. Thus, I do not dismiss the analog church as out of date. I still maintain that the best ecclesiological mode, as expressed by a lot of people I have talked to, is the actual, physical encounter. For, indeed, nothing will ever replace the real thing. Moreover, given the ecclesiology of Vatican II, one may not overemphasize the merits of cyberchurches.<sup>74</sup> Despite the many

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<sup>71</sup> See Kim, Jay Y., *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places and Things in the Digital Age* (InterVarsity Press: Kindle Edition, 2020), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> See Junno Arocho Esteves, “Spirituality, encounter at the heart of the World Mission Sunday, cardinal says,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, 21 October 2021, accessed on 22 October 2021, <https://osvnews.com/2021/10/21/spirituality-encounter-at-heart-of-world-mission-sunday-cardinal-says/>

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Hill, in the *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, outlined a number of connotations pertaining to the church. According to him, the Church can mean: 1. A single Christian; 2. A building; 3. A denomination or community; and 4. All Christians everywhere. Having these in mind, we can surmise that the manifestation of the so-called cyber churches is not against the grain of the official Catholic understanding of what a church is. Hill, Jonathan, *Hand book to the history of Christianity* (Oxford England: Lion Publishing, 2006), 532. Around the time of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, in 1965, Marie-Joseph Le Guillou defined the Church in these terms: “The Church is recognized as a society of fellowship with God, the sacrament of salvation, the people of God established as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.” See Britannica, *The Liturgy of the Word*, accessed December 23, 2021,

ways in which they resemble the *de facto* and *de iure* parishes or local churches (i.e., they embody a kind of fellowship with God and their neighbor), they will never be seen as at par with the latter.<sup>75</sup> They will continue to be regarded as either auxiliary or supplementary services rendered by the Church. This goes without saying that the viability of cyber churches is yet to be seen. It is too early to tell whether they will withstand the test of time or not.

Nevertheless, I do recognize as well the value of cyber churches today, because I do believe that this new modality levels the playing field for it helps in transcending the hierarchical structures that distinguish the

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<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism/The-liturgy-of-the-Word>.

<sup>75</sup> In a conclusion drawn by Yohannes in a study he conducted, he underscored the following points regarding the similarities and differences between the cyber church and local church: “They indicated that a cyber-Church is a gathering of all believers spiritually with the objective of one idea like the local church i.e.— praising the Almighty God or preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In contrary, the other group agreed that the cyber Church is not considered as a church because the cyber Church has no proper attachment to the body of Jesus Christ to be considered as a church... This study revealed that both the cyber Church and local church focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The programs that are going on in local churches are also undertaken by cyber churches. Both churches have bible study, prayer and fasting programs, annual and seasonal conferences, preaching of the Word of God, worshiping God and sharing mutual concerns (spiritual, social and material, missionary work), and addressing issues related to the needs of believers, fellowship and counselling are among the programmes both churches have in common... The major difference that I discovered was that the anonymity of a member of the cyber church is included. This means that knowing the actual and true identity of the member of the cyber Church is very difficult and untrustworthy unlike the local church. Furthermore, the availability of the cyber Church throughout the twenty-four hours makes a big difference between the local and the cyber Church. Attending the programs of the cyber Church while being in the hospital or living in refugee camps, and in areas where local churches do not exist, is also the difference revealed between the cyber and the local church in the study. In addition to the above the main difference is also the sacraments which needs to be done in the presence of the person who will be committing himself for the action, this action cannot be done in the cyber Church since it is lacking the physical contact we observed in the Bible, For Example, the water Baptism which should be done in the presence of the Baptizer and witnesses, prayer in laying on of hands, and the ceremony of matrimony, which requires the vows of both the bride and the groom. See Teffera Legesse Yohannes, *The Cyber Church: How it is understood by its participants, with special reference to the Ethiopian Christians Plus all Room in Paltalk* (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2017), 76-78.

priesthood of the ordained from the priesthood of the believers. It poses a challenge to the orthodox view of church life, but it also provides a wider avenue for the appreciation of the royal priesthood which every baptized Christian has received. According to James Paulraj, the “Cyber church is not a destructive part of the real church rather it supports the real church.”<sup>76</sup> In his own estimation, it actually does a great service to the real church by revealing itself to the world.<sup>77</sup> By entering the realm of the digital world, it becomes international or universal. In a way, it reconstructs the real church, albeit in the most unconventional ways.

The decrease in church attendance in the contemporary world may be attributed to several factors and one of them, perhaps, is the burgeoning of cyber churches. Certainly, we cannot underestimate the threat that the “cyber church” poses to the normative ways of performing Christian rituals and living genuine Catholic ecclesial life. Liturgists agree that online masses cannot be accepted as sacramental celebrations but are mere devotional accommodations that would cater to those who, for grave reasons, may not be able to participate physically. Some may find it more convenient to remain in the digital realm and consider it not necessary to participate physically in the Church’s life and activities. But, from what I heard from most of the parishioners and people I talked to, they still prefer to be physically present in the celebrations and literally touch those they would like to reach out to.

At the same time, the existence of cyberchurches can also be seen as part of the transformative process geared towards providing more venues for the practitioners of faith, especially those whose physical movements are restricted or those who are categorized as “digital natives,” to participate in church life given the technologies that we have nowadays. Hence, it is not separate from the real church. In fact, it is an extension of the mission of the church for it caters to those who have difficulty physically accessing the activities of the church, especially those who are in faraway places. Through the cyberchurch, they are still able to participate actively, albeit virtually, in the liturgical or devotional services, as well as to share and interact with their fellow faithful. What we have in the cyber churches are broader spaces for worshippers to participate in church life wherever they are. They are united in worship despite their physical limitations. It is a new paradigm for collective worship that transcends caste, creed, color, and region. It is a safe space for religious freedom and dialogue. It can be an avenue for the free exchange of religious experience without the manipulation or dominance of the

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<sup>76</sup> Paulraj, *Church for All*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

hierarchy, a space for worship and gospel proclamation not necessarily aimed at converting people, but rather, to welcome and listen to one another in the spirit of synodality. On this note, Paulraj avers:

The cyberchurch is not only a space to proclaim God's word and doctrinal preaching but also it provides the space for people to share their experiences of how God has interacted with them. That is the day-to-day experience of common people. In the information age, people will listen to witness rather than dogmatic teaching. It gives the reality of human circumstances and their environment and God's intervention. That's not a supernatural or superpower projection, but God's power can be understood in human perception. It affirms the existence of God and the existence of human beings.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, participation in the activities of the cyberchurch can be considered as an attempt to respond to the sign of the times that calls for a renewed community of humanity under the loving and inclusive God.

Various configurations of cyberchurches have proliferated, especially because of the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. On this note, Blessed James Alberione's words come to mind: "While the Church itself always remains steadfast, it knows how to adapt to the circumstances and needs of time and place."<sup>79</sup>

Unfortunately, however, scholarly studies on how the notion of cyberchurch is being appropriated by the Catholic Church have been marginal. To name some, an article entitled "@CatholicChurch: An invitation to rethink Church ministry in the time of Covid-19" talks about the initiative of some Jesuits in Korea, especially Rev. Hwang Changyon, who asserts that "the Catholic Church should create a space for each generation because each generation has its own issues and agenda. Only a cyberchurch can respond to this kind of *Cura Generationis*. Each generation can easily access a cyberchurch and a cyberchurch can reach out to each generation promptly."<sup>80</sup> "In a way," according to this famous

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> James Alberione, *Ut Perfectus Sit Homo Dei: Month of Spiritual Exercises* (1960) (Rome, Italy: Centre of Pauline Spirituality, 1998), 457.

<sup>80</sup> See Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific, @CatholicChurch: An invitation to rethink Church ministry in the time of Covid-19, July 20, 2020, accessed on October 7, 2021, <https://jcapsj.org/blog/2020/07/20/catholicchurch-an-invitation-to-rethink-church-ministry-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

priest Youtuber, “Covid-19 invites us to look beyond the horizon and to rethink the essence of religiosity.”<sup>81</sup>

As far as published work on Filipino cyberchurches is concerned, the article co-authored by Brazal and Odchique did not just focus on the Catholic scenario but also included in the discussion the experiences of non-Catholic Filipino migrants.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, even in the midst of the pandemic, several Filipino religious communities in Western Europe have carried on their regular, albeit mostly online, liturgical and paraliturgical activities, which they also complement with some outreach programs, especially to those who have been severely affected by the global health crisis. Their spiritual yearning has intensified.

As my contribution to this rather peripheral subject matter in theology or ecclesiology, I would like to share the experiences of two Filipino religious communities in Europe (i.e., Brussels and Athens), which I perceive to be manifestations of a cyberchurch occasioned by the current global health crisis.

### **HISTORIES AND DIGITAL MINISTRIES OF CFC-HOLD (BRUSSELS) AND MMC (ATHENS)**

Before delving into the experiences of these two Filipino migrant communities in Western Europe, allow me to say that in no way do I regard them as perfect embodiments of universally viable cyber churches. Perhaps, their manifestations are fleeting but somehow, in my own estimation, they, armed with their *Bahala Na* Ordinary Theology, providentially approximate the current understanding of what cyber churches are.

### **CFC-HOLD BRUSSELS**

The CFC-HOLD (Couples for Christ – Handmaids of the Lord) is part of a larger movement known as *Couples for Christ* that intends to renew and strengthen Christian family life that originated in the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Agnes Brazal and Randy Ochique, “Cyberchurch and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East,” In *Church in the Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body*, ed. Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston and Agnes Brazal (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).



Philippines.<sup>83</sup> This movement was first introduced in Belgium through the efforts of Brothers Tony Borja and Frank Padilla when they visited the European country in 1997. At first, ten couples responded to the invitation by the local organizers of the so-called Christian Life Program which usually marks the beginning of the members' journey as participants in the said movement.<sup>84</sup> These, therefore, formed the initial core group of CFC in Brussels which eventually expanded its mission to other sub-groupings to cater to what they refer to as "womb to tomb" ministries, such as the Kids for Christ (KFC), Youth for Christ (YFC), Handmaids of the Lord (HOLD), and Servants of the Lord (SOLD). In 2000, they had 75 members which were divided into households composed of 5 couples or 5-7 cell members under the pastoral supervision of a family head or a household head. Their activities include participation in the Filipino chaplaincy and other Filipino ministries in Brussels, as well as involvement in socio-civic affairs like the annual Filipino Independence Day celebration. Regularly, their members gather twice a month for their household meetings and Bible study/teaching. Once a year they take part in the European-wide conference or summits of CFC ministries. A big part of their ministry is also devoted to their program called Answering the Cry of the Poor (ANCOP) which is intended for the consolidation of CFC's endeavor in "Building the Church of the Poor" as manifested in their undertaking to build shelters, provide education, promote health and livelihood, and assist in community development. As of 2021, they are supporting 12 scholars from different parts of the Philippines. According to the members of CFC-HOLD in Brussels, this movement is a gift to them, because it provides them with a family in the midst of the loneliness and distress that they feel. It is their "home away from home." Here, we see clearly a church community led and sustained by lay Filipinos who straddle between the realms of economy and ministry. In that way, they have become instrumental in infusing the "*bahala na*" ordinary theology in the European ecclesiological landscape.

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<sup>83</sup> CFC is present in dioceses across all 81 provinces and 163 countries. It sent participants to the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, organized by Pope Francis in 2004. In 2000, CFC was recognized by the Holy See as a private international association of the lay faithful of pontifical right.

<sup>84</sup> The first assembly was done in Hilton Hotel organized by Brother Johnny & Sister Charity de Villa. The original membership included Romeo & Marivic Dela Vega, Adela de Lulu, Jessie Trinidad, Ruby Loyola, Lily Ayuste & Girlie Ayuste.

## FILIPINO MIGRANT CYBERCHURCHES IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CFC-HOLD has been using the internet as an instrument for evangelization and organization. Their members have made use of this technology in reaching out to one another and providing spiritual nourishment to both their members and recipients of their outreach programs. During the pandemic, their reliance on the power of the internet was amplified, which momentarily transformed them to a kind of cyberchurch. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic landed in Belgium, it significantly restricted the movement of people and hence, greatly hampered the occasions of face-to-face gatherings. In response, CFC-HOLD members migrated to online household meetings and celebrations of masses via Zoom and/or FB live. They checked on each other's well-being via social media. They even organized a virtual "paskovid" party, Valentine's celebration dubbed as "A Heart Can Hold," and a special Mothers' Celebration cum Climate Change Awareness Conference called "Ang Ganda Mo Nanay," apart from their regular celebration of the "Lord's Day" which also migrated to the virtual sphere. These are made possible in view of maintaining their missionary momentum amidst the pandemic and also to promote mental health amid the distressful condition of being locked down. Social media was widely used for information dissemination, spiritual formation, Eucharistic celebration, outreach counseling program, and even Zumba sessions, which definitely give witness to what Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican theologian, dramatically describes as people's experience of socialization vis-à-vis the pandemic: "Suddenly, when I must not touch, I am in touch with people whom I have not seen for years. Yes, there is isolation, but also a new and wide communion of those who care."<sup>85</sup>

### CONCLUSION

## MMC ATHENS

The Miraculous Medal Center (MMC) at 9B Sorovits, Athens was born in December of the year 2003 through the initiative of the Daughters of Charity Greece, especially the late Sr. Emma Rivera who was recognized as Filipino Chaplain by both the Catholic hierarchy in Greece and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. Before this

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<sup>85</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, "Coronavirus is Depriving Us of Touch, the Nourishment of our Humanity," March 2020, 17, *International Dominican Information*, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/coronavirus-is-depriving-us-of-touch-the-nourishment-of-our-humanity/12061>

inauguration, this center which has been catering to Filipino migrants in Greece had its home in the Cathedral of Saint Dennis in Athens that had an outreach ministry to the parishes of Piraeus, Psychiko, and Agia Theresia. Being recognized as a pastoral arm of the CBCP whose purpose is to arouse the immense missionary potentials of Filipino migrants, this center has been seen as a response to the signs of the time wherein the migrants and refugees are regarded as the “new poor” in today’s world. Thus, all the existing programs of the center are geared to serve migrants and their families by helping them realize themselves as a person and in the image of God. Impelled by the Charity of the crucified Christ, the MMC set up a network for advocacy to empower the people it is serving. To achieve its purpose of serving all migrants, three commissions were created namely: Worship, Evangelization, and Service Commissions. Worship and Evangelization perform spiritual activities for the apostolate of migrants and the Service Commission gives moral, temporal, and human promotion assistance. An allied ministry to the Service Commission, the Social and Legal Arm of the Center has been involved in the information dissemination and education campaign on laws affecting migrants. Moreover, it coordinates with the Philippine Embassy, POLO, and OWWA on matters affecting Filipino workers. It is not surprising, therefore, that the pastoral activities of the MMC had been replicated in various Filipino ministries in Europe and echoed most especially in the International Consultation Meetings on the Filipino Ministry Overseas in Europe and in the IV World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees in the Vatican City. Since the passing away of Sr. Emma, the center has been managed and maintained by lay Filipino volunteers in Athens under the more relaxed supervision of the Daughters of Charity. Truly, the Filipino migrants in Athens have learned to embrace their new identity as “accidental missionaries” who actively participate in the ongoing inculturation of their “*pananampalataya*”.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, as a particular response to the current sign of the time, the MMC morphed into a kind of cyberchurch by migrating from a physical venue for ecclesiastical transactions to a virtual landscape for contemporary church life. The situation certainly called for flexibility and adaptation to maintain contact with the members of MMC and carry on with the center’s mission. Hence, at the height of the lockdowns in Athens, the Center had provided the members with the necessary activities, such as worship, formation, and counseling sessions via the digital platform, which involved priests and experts from the Philippines, Belgium, and

other parts of Europe. While the Center has been allowed by the State to conduct onsite activities again since the second quarter of 2021, it has maintained some of its core activities in the digital sphere alongside the actual physical ones because the members have realized the indispensable value of digital connectivity in the contemporary world. Although it may not be the ideal way to build a community, they argue that community building may still be possible even in that most unlikely period with the help of modern technology.

### **A PROVIDENTIAL RECONFIGURATION?**

I believe that Filipinos' almost natural affinity toward social media was a providential predisposition that facilitated, inspired by their *Bahala Na* Ordinary Theology, their migration to the virtual platform of ecclesiology. By featuring the temporary ecclesiological reconfigurations of CFC-HOLD and MMC amid the pandemic, I am not canonizing these two faith communities as paragons of contemporary cyberchurches. They still have some limitations and, as a matter of fact, they do not even claim to embody them. Perhaps, they are not even aware of it. Based on my personal appraisal, however, I could see that they approximate the characteristics proper of a cyberchurch. Organically, because of the challenging circumstances brought about by the global health crisis, significantly but unwittingly they evolved into a church community that relied heavily on the power of the digital world, which they primarily utilized to perpetuate their ecclesiological and missiological vocation in the context migration. This shift gave the ordinary practitioners of faith more leverage to shepherd their respective members with minimal intervention from the hierarchy who customarily would serve as the main movers and shakers in the ecclesiastical setting. The activities conducted in their respective churches are mainly initiated by lay leaders, which reveal the 'ordinary theology' espoused by the Filipino migrants that combine the mundane and the divine spheres. As they try to grapple with the difficulties brought about by the restrictions attendant to the COVID-19 pandemic, no doubt, their *bahala na* faith (*pananampalataya*) shines even brighter as they express their profound hope and their remarkable resilience vis-à-vis distress and disenfranchisement. While being locked down they have endeavored to keep in touch with one another for psychological, emotional, and material support as they pray, celebrate the liturgy and conduct formation sessions through digital platforms. As they pay attention to the needs of their members that came in different shapes and sizes, they never lose sight of their mission to extend aid to the more

worrisome conditions of people in the Philippines, as well as in their host countries. Their financial predicaments brought about by the inability to work full time during the pandemic did not stop them from exercising solidarity and stewardship.

Having said that, I am convinced that these wonderful manifestations of Filipino migrant cyberchurches that unfolded in these trying times courtesy of the pandemic are a meaningful way to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christianity. It is a *missio ad gentes* made possible by “accidental missionaries” in the person of the lay Filipino migrants in Brussels and Athens.

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