Interdisciplinarity as a Means of Doing Theology: Jose Mario Francisco and His Writings

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As a Jesuit, Jose Mario Francisco has occupied various positions in the academe as a teacher and an administrator. At the same time, he has engaged in research on various topics such as Asian theology, religious identity, Christology, literary theory, Philippine literature in English, translation, and hermeneutics. A thread that runs through his writings is his interdisciplinary approach to the subject of his inquiry. A particular interest of Francisco in his efforts to understand Filipino Catholicism is his emphasis on mission as translation which for him necessarily involves interpretation.

Introduction

I find it daunting to talk about the contributions of Fr. Jose Mario Francisco, SJ. Not only has he written extensively on various themes but he was also my teacher at the Loyola School of Theology. I accepted the invitation to talk about his writings as an acknowledgment of his part in my own theological education. I hope to do justice to what he has contributed to the Philippine theological landscape.

My presentation is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will talk about his education and vocation as a Jesuit since they set the stage, so to speak, for his ministry and his writings. In the second part, I will highlight what it seems to me is a particular characteristic of his writings–their interdisciplinarity. He not only uses traditional theological sources, such as the Bible, magisterial teachings and the writings of other theologians, but he also employs the insights of other disciplines, such as literary theory, history, anthropology and sociology. In the third part, I would like to talk about what, it appears to me, is his understanding of mission as

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translation, a dynamic process in which what is translated is received and understood locally, a process that shapes and is shaped by its historical and cultural context.

A Scholarly Son of Ignatius

Like our present Pope Francis and his fellow Jesuit, Francisco studied chemistry at Ateneo de Manila University and finished it in 1968. He then earned his MA in Literature in 1973 from the same university, graduate studies that would have a lasting impact in his scholarly life. He then obtained his licentiate in theology from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley and his PhD in Philosophical Theology from the Graduate Theological Union also at Berkley in 1986.

He started his involvement in the teaching ministry at Xavier University in 1972 and was there for 2 years. He has been teaching with the Ateneo de Manila University since 1975 teaching subjects in literature, theology and philosophy. He was the chair of the Department of English of Ateneo from 1993-1995 and was a member of the university's Curriculum Committee during those years. He was also a member of the board of trustees of the Ateneo Library for Women's Writings (1994-2000). At present, he is a member of the Ateneo's board of trustees having served so far in that capacity for a total of 18 years (1991-1999, 2009-2018).

After his doctoral studies at GTU-Berkley, he started teaching at the Loyola School of Theology. He served as its executive secretary from 1988-1991 and then its dean (concurrently for 2 years) from 1989-1992. From 2006-2013, he was the director of the East Asian Pastoral Institute and was also part of its faculty. After his tenure at the EAPI, he became LST's president from 2006-2013. (He was my teacher in the course, Faith and Inspiration, the second semester of 1993-1994 and in Creation, Sin and Eschatology in the first semester of 1994-1995.) Allow me to say a few things about his service as LST's president since they are indicative of how he views theological education. In his inaugural address in 2006 as the president of LST, he avers that LST's distinctive character is as follows:

> Its locus and *kairos* being what they are, LST is called to address the theological concern regarding the meaning of Christian Faith for authentic worship and human development from and in a context where Christianity is influential, where the practice of religion is not threatened. But for its formation to bear some mark of truthfulness, catholicity, and holiness, it must be in conversation with theological insight from contexts where Christianity is a minority faith, primarily concentrated among the poor and living with other religious traditions as neighbors, where Christianity is marginalized by militant secularism or threatened by fundamentalisms within and outside, and where Christianity partners with all those of good will.[1]

He further adds, "theological formation at LST demands an inclusive way of proceeding based, more than ever and in equal measure, on profound faithfulness to our Christian heritage as well as radical engagement with our social situation."[2]

As president of LST, he initiated the process of "strategic planning"–"discerning how best to incarnate in the coming years our vision-mission as an ecclesiastical faculty of theology."[3] Out of it came three strategic directives for LST–"to be more Asian, to help schools in religious education, and to provide theological reflection on pressing social issues."[4] What is LST to perform in order to respond to these directives? For Francisco, this demands two things: first, it requires a deeper understanding of culture–what he calls "cultural literacy." And second, there is a need to explicitate the context from which the classic texts of, and subsequent commentaries on, our tradition come"[5]–a task that is quite evident in his analysis of religious literature. He significantly adds that "it is through an awareness of *difference* that we gain a deeper

[1] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Loyola School of Theology's Locus and Kairos," *Landas* 26, no. 2 (2012): 157.
[2] Ibid., 157.
[3] Ibid., 157.
[4] Ibid., 163.
[5] Ibid., 164.

understanding of both others and ourselves as humans and Christians." [6] He considers "the mission of Loyola School of Theology is to educate in the faith, sustain personal theological growth, and assist in [the] effective empowerment of all who desire to serve God's people by ministries in and of the Church."[7] For those who will serve God's people as ordained ministers, he stresses the importance of both transparency and accountability "not because they are sound organizational practices but because they are profoundly characteristic of Jesus' preaching and ministry."[8] What LST does is indeed to impart solid theology but more than that, he imagines the school's mandate "as capacity-building—literally, building your capacity as ministers in whatever context you are missioned in, and further building the capacity of those you minister to."[9]

Perhaps, it is noteworthy that Francisco is the most integrated member of LST at the Ateneo which manifests his own preference, it seems to me, not to be confined to LST's context–important as it is, and engage Ateneo's bigger community which has different and more varied concerns and which is more pluralistic not only in terms of disciplines but also of voices. Moreover, he has served in various capacities in the Society of Jesus, the government and other (non-governmental) organizations. As an academic, he has served the Technical Committee on Catholic Religious Education of Commission on Higher Education as its member since 2010 and as its chair from 2011-2013. In the Society, he was the consultor for the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific from 1996-2013 and was the chair of its Theological Cooperation Working Group during those same years. He was the Philippine Province's consultor from 1995-2005 and from 2007 to the present. He was also the chair of the Province's Commission on Ministries from 1999-2004. He has served (and continues to serve) as a

[6] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Challenges of Our Strategic Directives," *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012):164-65, emphasis mine.

[7] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "What Church Leaders Ask of Loyola School of Theology," *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 170.

[8] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Clerical Power," *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 178.

[9] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Theological Education Plus," *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 182.

member of the board of trustees of the following organizations: Blessed Peter Faber Foundation for Spiritual Formation, Jesuit Communications Foundation, Haribon Foundation for Environmental Research and Advocacy, Catechists' Foundation of the Philippines, Jesuit Volunteers Philippines and Emmaus Center for Formation.

In addition to his teaching at the Ateneo and LST, he has also taught in the United States and Rome. He was an adjunct faculty at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley in 2000 and 2002. He was also the Gasson Chair Professor at Boston College from 2005-2006, the second Filipino to be awarded this chair (the other one being the late Bishop Francisco Claver, SJ). In the past years (2014-2016), he has spent a semester every academic year at the Gregorian University where he has taught contextual theology. Recently, he was also involved in the *Project on Asian Pacific Catholicism and Globalization* of the Institute of Religion, Politics and Society of the Australian Catholic University and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs of Georgetown University.

This overview of Francisco's involvements—while not exhaustive—shows the breadth and depth of Francisco's involvement. As I read all of them in his CV, it is no small wonder that he has found the time to engage in research. I now turn to his writings in what follows.

BEING INTERDISCIPLINARY

Francisco has written and lectured on various theological themes, such as theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, theological anthropology, Asian theology, Christology, Faith and Inspiration, religious identity, multi-disciplinary approaches to theological studies, literary theory, Philippine literature in English, translation, and hermeneutics. A thread that runs through all of his writings is their interdisciplinary character. For instance, he analyzes the development of religious thought in Tagalog as a means of understanding Filipino Catholicism. In "Panitikan at Kristiyanismong Pilipino," an article in Filipino published in *Philippine Studies*, he discerns an image of Christ that arises out of a

particular historical context in the Philippines: i) *Kristo, uliran ng tao* (Spanish occupation); ii) *Kristo, ang katwiran ng mundo* (American occupation); and iii) *Kristo, ang Mesias ng lipunan* (after the Second World War). As regards *Kristo, uliran ng tao*, Francisco illustrates his point by looking at four texts: i) Gaspar Aquino de Belen's "Ang Mahal na Pasion"; ii) "Pasyong Henesis"/"Pasyong Pilapil"; iii) Francisco Baltazar's *Florante at Laura*; and iv) the writings of Apolinario de la Cruz (alias Hermano Pule). Francisco states, "*magkakaiba ang mga katangiang ibinigay ng mga manunulat kay Kristo na dapat tularan ng tao. Kung sa pagpipintura, iisa lamang ang paksa - ang pagiging uliran ni Kristo - ngunit iba't iba naman ang estilo ng paglalarawan.*"[10] Francisco shows how in *Florante at Laura* the image of the long-suffering Christ is highlighted, an observation that led him to conclude, "*Kinasangkapan ng mga Kastila at kanilang alipures ang larawan ni Kristo upang mapanatili ang dayuhang kapangyarihan.*"[11] In contrast to this is Hermano Pule's understanding that one's following of Christ demands that his followers overcome the divisions that separate them from each other–an emphasis that eventually led to the rebellion of the *Cofradia* he founded. It is noteworthy that for Francisco,

> *Ang pagsusuri sa paglalarawan kay Kristo ay hindi isinasagawa upang sukatin kung naaayon ito sa wastong doktrina ng Simbahan. Hindi rin ito nanggagaling sa pag-aalinlangan sa Diyos tulad ng matatagpuan sa Kanluran. Sa katunayan, ang gagampanang pagsisiyasat sa larawan ni Kristo ay nababatay sa paghahangad sa higit na katapatan kay Kristo, at nag-uugat sa mahabang kasaysayan ng pananampalataya sa ating bayan.*[12]

Francisco's interdisciplinary approach is quite evident in his study, "Two Currents of Filipino Christianity," in which he looks at the "traditional form of faith" and the emergence of basic

[10] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Panitikan at Kristiyanismong Pilipino: Nagbabagong Pananaw," *Philippine Studies* 25, no. 2 (1977): 192.
[11] Ibid., 196.
[12] Ibid., 189.

Christian communities vis-à-vis the church's social mission.[13] (Francisco 1988a, 1988b, 1989). In his discussion on the complexity of the traditional form of faith, he refers to the studies of two historians: Rafael Ileto on *Pasyong Henesis* and John Schumacher on the religious character of the Philippine Revolution. In explaining how in the traditional form of faith "Christ as a model for all Christians functions as a norm for interpretation,"[14] Francisco refers to various religious folk practices, e.g. *pasyon, panunuluyan* and *sinakulo*, and religious literature as they developed during the Spanish colonial period. When he discusses structures that are related to the traditional form of faith, he uses the writings of anthropologists, such as Frank Lynch, Mary Hollnsteiner and F. Landa Jocano all of whom have written about the Filipino family. It is quite remarkable how Francisco seems to be able to use seamlessly the studies from other disciplines in developing his ideas and arguing his points.

Francisco also uses discourse analysis in his more recent writings. For example, he analyzes the discourse of the Catholic Church in relation to the national debate on the Reproductive Health bill in Congress. He traces the history of the Catholic Church's opposition to it–the continuity of the statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) with the church's teaching on marriage, family and contraception, and he also shows the various frames of reference in arguing against the proposed bill-population management, reproductive health/responsible parenthood, and family planning–the discontinuity in the church's statements. He argues that a particular weakness of the statements of the CBCP is its ambiguous statements on the family. He suggests that this is possibly because the CBCP uses as a norm an implicit ideal portrait of the family– "husband and wife with children, living at home within a stable neighborhood and sufficiently supported by the breadwinner's

[13] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Two Currents in Filipino Christianity," *Landas* 2, no. 1 (1988): 25-64; Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Two Currents in Filipino Christianity II," *Landas* 2 no. 2 (1988): 166-93; Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Two Currents in Filipino Christianity III," *Landas* 3, no. 1 (1989): 3-16.

[14] Francisco, "Two Currents in Filipino Christianity," 32.

salary. If such is the case, one could ask whether this portrait provides the sole model of the Christian family or even whether the experience of Filipino families comes close to it."[15]

Using the insight of Benedict Anderson on a nation as an "imagined community" and applying it to the Catholic bishops' understanding of the Philippines as a "Catholic nation," Francisco offers a close reading of the discourse of the CBCP on it. He shows how the imaginary of the "Catholic nation" was utilized by church officials to protect the institution against perceived enemies and attacks, e.g. the inclusion of nationalist books which are deemed inimical to church interests in the education curriculum. He also illustrates how the imaginary became a catalyst for change, a tool for the common good and a boundary for exclusion.[16] The main problem with this "imagined community" of the "Catholic nation" is that it conflates the body politic with the body Catholic. As Francisco puts it, "imagining identity as Christian and as Filipino went hand in hand with imagining community as nation and Christian."[17] This conflation in church discourse of the two bodies does not do justice to the plurality of Philippine society. It would even appear that the church arrogates for itself the right to speak even for those who do not share its faith and interpretation of social realities. Hence, Francisco argues that there is a need for the church to re-imagine, dis-imagine or deconstruct the imaginary because of its negative consequences. Such a task cannot be based on an uncritical acceptance of the church's colonial past or the use of a purely deductive pastoral logic. The imaginary will also have to be recreated in the public domain and with the involvement of all

[15] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Letting the Texts on RH Speak for Themselves: (Dis)Continuity and (Counter) Point in CBCP Statements," *Philippine Studies* 63, no. 2 (2015): 237.

[16] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "'In but Not of the World": Filipino Catholicism and its Powers,'" in *Theology and Power: International Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Bullivant, Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, Daniel Franklin Pilario, and Agnes M. Brazal (New York and Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 85-101.

[17] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Imagining Identity/Community as Christian/Filipino: Implications for Doing Theology in East Asian Contexts," in *Beyond the Borders of Baptism: Catholicity, Allegiances and Lived Identities*, ed. Michael Budde (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 291.

stakeholders. It must also contend with the impact of globalization on the nation and on religion.[18] Moreover,

> Dis-imagining the religious nation would facilitate the inclusion and empowerment of minority religious and ethnic groups who have been excluded by the historical construction of the religious state and the resulting dominance of some religions in particular contexts... Dissociating religion and nation could thus facilitate dialogue and collaboration between religions.[19]

It seems to me that the thread that runs through Francisco's interdisciplinary approach is his desire to understand Filipino Catholicism in all its complexities as an ongoing historical project, its impact on contemporary Philippine society and its challenges to the present church. In the next section, I would like to focus on a particular interest of Francisco that, it seems to me, is an insightful way of understanding the dynamics of mission: translation.

MISSION AS TRANSLATION

When the Spanish missionaries began their evangelization in the Philippines in the 16th century, they made the decision to use local languages and wrote catechisms and prayers in the vernacular. It was not simply a matter of transplantation but "a dynamic encounter between Christianity and the cultural context." [20] Francisco illustrates the interplay of religious and theological tradition and the cultural world of the Tagalogs when he discusses how the Dominican, Francisco Blancas de San Jose, translated the Spanish word "esclavo" (slave) to "alipin" and its cognates in explaining Christian soteriology. While Blancas' use of "alipin" had

[18] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "People of God, People of the Nation: Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism," *Philippine Studies,* 62 nos. 3-4: 341-75.

[19] Francisco, "Imagining Identity/Community as Christian/Filipino," 295.

[20] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Translating Christianity into Asian Tongues: Cultural Dynamics and Theological Issues," *Asian Christian Review* 1, no. 2 (2007): 71.

at its backdrop the biblical tradition on redemption and its medieval explanation, the Tagalogs of the 17th century had their own vernacular nuances of "alipin" and their own views and practice of slavery. For instance, the Tagalogs' practice and understanding of slavery is different from the chattel slavery practiced in Europe and the Americas, a fact which necessarily influenced the reception of Blancas' preaching to the Tagalogs about salvation. In this encounter,

> What emerges in this dynamic encounter between Christianity and 17th century Tagalog society is a Christianity characterized by a view of divine-human relations in terms of negotiation and of salvation as a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Though these characteristics might have been present in the tradition brought by Blancas or even endemic to Christianity, it was the cultural context then that gave shape and prominence to these characteristics of Tagalog Christianity then.[21]

This leads Francisco to propose that the encounter between Christianity and cultural context be described in terms of translation, which "involves more than finding equivalences between the so-called data of revelation and the new situation"[22] and is actually "a two-way process by which meaning in a source language is carried over into a target language."[23] Translation is necessarily "interpretation" or "highlighting." Hence, when Christianity is proclaimed in a new historical context – when it is translated – it takes on a new shape and a new interpretation of it is produced.

> ... [O]ne can rightly speak of the emergence of a native Christianity in terms of translation. Just as particular Christian texts in Spanish were transposed into the vernaculars, so was Spanish

[21] Francisco, "Translating Christianity into Asian Tongues," 75.
[22] Ibid., 77.
[23] Ibid., 78.

> Catholicism translated and, as with any translation, what emerged as native Christianity, to use Gadamer's vocabulary, "an Interpretation" or "a re-creation."[24]

Francisco further argues that a theology of cultural context (instead of simply culture since there will always be elements of contestation in one's culture) from below is needed–one that starts with the particularities of a context and discern God's presence in them. One's cultural context in this view is rooted in God–truly sacramental–and is the locus of God's revelation.

Francisco's study on the translation of the vice *sloth* in Philippine society manifests the dynamic mediation between social worlds. The capital sins were first introduced to the Philippines in the Juan de Oliver's late–16th century catechism, *Doctrina Cristiana*. It translated the Spanish word for sloth, *pereza*, into *catamaran* in Tagalog. Oliver describes it as "aversion to what is good" and "is... related to the feeling of sorrow... as well as evil behaviour."[25] Moreover, for Oliver, sloth is the non–fulfillment of one's Christian duties. However, in translating this view into native Philippine society, "the catechism employs fierce rhetoric against the natives and betrays colonial attitudes toward native culture."[26] Examples of slothful behaviour among the natives are excessive drinking (linked with "pagan" rituals), native fascination with gold artifacts, and non-appreciation of the work of missionaries.

Later on, the meaning of sloth was extended to the political arena. Natives who fled to mountains and refused to submit themselves to the *reduccion* were seen as slothful. In Lucio Miguel Bustamente's *Tandang Bacio Macunat*, one finds the conflation of religious and political interests. Sloth is no longer seen here as the

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[24] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Speaking in Many Tongues: Translation and Transcendence in Early Filipino Christianity," in *Philosophy, Religions, and Transcendence: Conference Mondial des Institutions Universitaires Catholique de Philosophie, Manila*, ed. Philippe Capelle-Dumont, *Budhi* 13, nos. 1-3 (2008): 611.

[25] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Translating Vice into Filipino: Religious, Colonial and Nationalist Discourses on Sloth," In *Translation in Asia: theories, practices, histories*, eds., Ronit Ricci and Jan van der Purten (Manchester UK and Kinderhook NY: St. Jerome Press, 2011), 107.

[26] Ibid., 108.

failure of an individual to observe one's religious duties but is seen as the characteristic of all natives. It is to this characterization of Filipinos as lazy and unreliable that 19th century nationalists, like Gregorio Sancianco, Graciano Lopez Jaena and Jose Rizal responded. They argued that pre-Hispanic Filipinos were not indolent and that their perceived indolence was actually the consequence of Spanish colonization, an indictment of the Spanish colonial project. Nevertheless, the view of Filipinos as slothful continued during the American colonial period, a trait for which Americans blamed the Spaniards. In order to rectify their laziness, the American colonizers emphasized the importance of hard work as evident in the education system that the Americans organized while the Protestant missionaries preached the gospel of hard work – a cooperation which for Francisco, "approximates civil religion."[27]

Francisco's study on the translation of sloth from the Spanish colonial period up to the American colonial period shows how the process of translation evokes different discourses based on different and even competing religious, colonial and nationalist interests. His understanding of translation not only provides a means of understanding the development of the Catholic faith in our country, particularly the interests that underlie the process and that are promoted but also presents the challenge of coming up with an even "better" translation of the faith – one that is truly life-affirming and life-affirming for all.

CONCLUSION

What I have done here is merely to scratch the surface, so to speak, of Francisco's writings. I have not set out in my presentation to discuss all of his ideas but I do hope that I have spurred your interest in reading his writings and wrestling with his ideas. The need to be interdisciplinary is ever present. The task of doing theology must never be insulated from other disciplines. Rather, it must be in dialogue with them in order that we may have a richer understanding of the faith and the church. In being

[27] Ibid., 111.

interdisciplinary, we are in a sense we are able to better "translate" the Gospel in diverse ways that are truly liberative and life-giving.

For all your contributions to the church and society, *maraming salamat,* Fr. Mario!

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