

A REFLECTION ON DAKATEO CONFERENCE

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Every year, activities and meetings keep DaKaTeo moving. Trustees, officers, or committee members would meet in small groups to discuss association-related matters. Some members would encounter one another in conferences and seminars, but none as big and significant as the association's annual theological conference.

The bigness is reflected in intensive and extensive preparations of the annual event, the number of participants, including the public on the first day, the presence of church leaders on a few occasions, and the number and quality of scholarly papers presented.

Its significance lies in the uninterrupted continuity of tradition, which began in 2002, and the holding of the annual corporation meeting and election of a new set of Board of Trustees and officers. In addition, the conference offers a wonderful opportunity for officers and members to strengthen their unity and commitment to the association's vision of building a more just and more compassionate church and society. The conference is not all presentations and discussions. Casual conversations, fellowship at tables, solidarity night preceded by a customary cocktail, and a cultural outing on the last day remain an integral part of the conference. It is where the theologians are in their element, beyond intellectual display, marked by critically enlightening and sharp exchanges of ideas and insights.

The November 2025 Cebu event, which drew 22 DaKaTeo theologians from different parts of the country, was held at the downtown campus of the University of San Jose Recoletos and the hill-nestled Redemptorist Retreat (Holy Family) Retreat House, respectively. The two venues are 7.5 kilometers apart, which means

travelling by bus for around 25 minutes along modern or historical avenues and streets. This allowed the theologians, especially the first timers in Cebu, to get a sense of what the city looked like.

This year, it was “*Pagbubukang Liwayway/Banagbanag: Rethinking Theology amidst Violence.*” The first part of the theme, expressed in Filipino and Cebuano languages, is, in English, the breaking of dawn, a coming to light, or emerging brightness. The image evokes a glimmer of hope. The second part addresses both the enduring and emergent realities of violence in society, culture, and even ecclesial life.

The lexical pairing suggests both the struggle to perceive and draw theological meaning from suffering and the fragile yet resilient promise of hope. At a time when violence— structural, interpersonal, cultural, and political— continues to leave deep wounds in Filipino communities, the theme invited participants to rethink theology not merely as an academic discipline or intellectual exercise, but as a praxis of discernment, healing, and prophetic witness leading to interruption or disruption. As Johan Baptist Metz once wrote: “The shortest definition of religion is interruption.” Alluding to Jesus’s dangerous memory, he argues that faith interrupts systems of violence through the dangerous memory of suffering. Theology at the “dawn” must therefore break the silence around violence and injustice, allowing the memory of victims to open a new horizon for justice.

On the first day of the conference, we were especially blessed by the presence of the newly installed Archbishop of Cebu, Alberto “Abet” Uy. He presided over the celebration of the Eucharist at the Church of Mt. Carmel Parish, adjacent to the university campus. Incidentally, he was a former Philosophy student of a DaKaTeo member, Dr. Aloysius Cartagenas, during his seminary formation. Addressing the DaKaTeo family, he waxed poetic with a stirring message: “We are not called to be theorists of the dawn. We are called to be bearers of dawn. ...In a time of so

much noise, the world does not need louder theologians. It needs braver, kinder, more Christ-like theologians.”

The first day, dubbed People of God, drew several participants from the public. The USJR president, Fr. Eduardo Celiz, OAR, and the outgoing DaKaTeo president, yours truly, set the tone of the conference in their welcome addresses, followed by Bishop Gerardo Alminaza’s powerful and challenging keynote address, in which he emphasized the need to free God’s creation from ecological sin. Speaking like a prophet, he pointed out the futility of recycling “our way out of systemic injustice.” Drawing on his pastoral experience in Negros Occidental, he believes there is no healing while we tolerate the sins that wound creation.

The day’s conference papers were arranged thematically into Living Hope: Theology and Praxis (first session) and Hope and Violence in Philippine Culture and Society (second session). On the second day, the conference focused on the following themes: Critical Education amidst Violence (third session); Religion and Structural Violence and Queering Hope (fourth); and Theologizing Sanity, and Theological Imagination (fifth).

There is universal agreement among DaKaTeo theologians that theology should not be done from the clouds or an ivory tower. Rather, it must respond to the concrete realities faced by communities: the violence of poverty, displacement, discrimination, gendered oppression, and political unrest. The way is to integrate praxis and reflection. Theology must taste the dust of the streets and listen to the lament of the poor if it is to speak truthfully about God. The conference encouraged the participants to integrate academic inquiry with pastoral engagement, ensuring that theological reflection remains rooted in lived realities.

The Church’s prophetic role vis-à-vis the ugly reality of violence resonated strongly throughout the conference. Participants were reminded that the Church must stand in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for systemic

transformation. This prophetic witness requires courage, humility, and a commitment to truth grounded in the Gospel.

In the conference, the notion of violence was not interpreted only as physical harm. Presenters invited participants to consider symbolic and epistemic violence—the ways dominant cultural powers silence certain voices, erase histories, and marginalize ways of knowing that do not conform to hegemonic norms. In this regard, theology becomes profoundly engaged with questions of justice, not as an ideological advocacy, but as the task of unveiling and resisting underlying structures that dehumanize. “Theology is a form of resistance,” insists Dorothee Sölle.

The emphasis on inclusion was another significant moment. Participants reflected on the need to listen more intentionally to women, Indigenous peoples, youth, LGBTQ+ communities, and the urban poor. Theology must be shaped by listening to experiences that have historically been excluded from dominant theological discourse. Only through such listening can the Church truly embody its identity as a communion of diverse yet united believers.

Inculturation also emerged as a key theme. Cebu, as a historic center of Christianity in the Philippines, symbolized the long journey of faith within Filipino culture. Presenters highlighted how Filipino concepts such as *sukol* (fight), *bayanihan* (communal solidarity), *pag-asa* (hope), and *malasakit* (compassion) can enrich theological reflection. These are not merely cultural sentiments but lived theological expressions that reveal God’s presence in communal life.

The conference emphasized personal and communal conversion. Responding to violence requires examining the violence within ourselves—prejudice, apathy, indifference, and complicity. Through communal prayer and reflection, participants were invited to acknowledge these realities and commit to transformation. This is synodality, walking together as Church,

listening to one another, and discerning the movement of the Spirit in complex times. Synodality is not merely an ecclesial process, but a theological method rooted in humility, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

Indeed, the conference was more than an academic gathering. It was a call to embodied faith and contextual theological engagement. *Pagbubukang-Liwaway / Banagbanag* became a hermeneutic of hope—a way of seeing light emerging from suffering and trusting that faithful theological reflection can contribute to healing and transformation. The conference reaffirmed that theology must be lived, practiced, and embodied if it is to remain faithful to the Gospel in a world marked by violence.

While at it, Christian theology always looks toward the dawn of God's future, the "fully already" of His kingdom, despite life's depressing negativities. The metaphor of *pagbubukang liwayway/banagbanag* echoes the eschatological horizon, where hope breaks into dark historical realities. Let Jürgen Moltmann remind us, dreamers and contextualizers, from time to time: "From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward-looking and forward moving."

I wish to end my journal with a statement of gratitude to my fellow theologians, particularly our Conference Committee and Executive Committee who generously spent so much time and effort to make the annual conference not only a reality but one worth treasuring and remembering. Yet, without the gracious collaboration of the University of San Jose Recoletos through its Center for Religious Education, we would not have attained the reasonable level of success we hoped to reach. The CRE faculty, led by their dynamic chairperson, Dr. Antonette Dandan, gave their all from organizing committees to helping in the logistics to documenting to booking for the venue, the conference halls, and the school bus, looking for caterers, and making it possible for the

performance of the USJR Adelante dance troupe, who regaled us with native stories through meaningful traditional Visayan dances.

“Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo.” (Karl Barth)

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