

Malasakit: The Filipino Face of God's Mercy

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the inclusive attitude of Jesus as the face of God's mercy in the gospels and the Filipino cultural value *Malasakit*. God's mercy is fully revealed and expressed in Jesus' inclusive love among the outcasts during His time. *Malasakit*, a Filipino core value, embodies the Filipino's outmost concern for others manifested in the Filipino social and cultural concept of *kapwa*. Employing Chupungco's Dynamic Equivalence, this paper argues that the inclusive attitude of Jesus in the Gospels, which Pope Francis highlighted in his Apostolic Exhortation on Joy of Love (*Amoris Laetitia*), finds its dynamic equivalent in the Filipino cultural value *Malasakit*. It claims further that the Pope's teaching on God's Mercy, and, in particular, the principle of inclusivity is a challenge to the Catholic Church, Filipinos and other nations to become inclusive communities, sharing *Malasakit* to all and thus becoming God's face of Mercy.

Keywords: Malasakit, Mercy, inclusive love, Amoris Laetitia, irregular situations

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Introduction

To regard someone as merciful implies that the person is loving, compassionate, forgiving, selfless and caring. Being merciful is the best compliment a person could ever receive from others. On the other hand, someone is “merciless” if the person demonstrates brutality, revenge, hatred and evil desires on others.

In the Gospel of Luke it says “be merciful just as your Father also is merciful”¹ As God’s children, Christians are called to be merciful by being kind, humble, meek and patient...all these reflect who God is.

Pope Francis, as the Vicar of Christ on earth, always emphasizes mercy as he speaks on behalf of the whole Catholic Church. He asserts that mercy allows Christians to understand God and themselves better and this will prompt them to recognize and help those who are most in need. His message in *Amoris Laetitia* (joy of love) is to make everyone know that, in spite of the fact that couples in irregular situations have fallen outside the bounds of a valid sacramental marriage, they must be recognized as God’s children, must be loved and helped by the Church.

Last 2016, when the Pope visited the Philippines with the theme “Mercy and compassion”, the Filipinos recognized him as articulated by Archbishop Socrates Villegas, the former CBCP President as “Our compassionate shepherd who comes to show his deep concern for our people who have gone through devastating calamities, especially in the Visayas. He comes to confirm us in our faith as we face the challenges of witnessing the Joy of the Gospel in the midst of our trials. This is an eloquent way of showing mercy and compassion.” His presence to all Filipinos especially to those in Visayas was truly God’s merciful presence.

As a nation, the Filipinos have experienced great trials. But their faith is always strengthened by their innate ability to recognize the presence of God in the face of such. Herewith, the cultural value “*malasakit*” becomes a compendium if not a second nature that Filipinos always find handy in dealing with pressing events of daily life.

Although “*malasakit*” has no exact translation in the English language, Filipinos can interpret it in a number of ways based on how it is used. For instance, *malasakit* means showing sincere care, concern, compassion, or empathy. They can also regard *malasakit* to their strong close family ties. Filipinos treat others as if they are members of the family. This ‘others’ is what they call *kapwa*.

Root of Malasakit

Being concerned for others is rooted in the Christian thought that “God’s mercy transforms human hearts; it enables them, through the experience of a faithful love, to become merciful in return”² What is it about God's mercy that makes Filipinos more merciful in return? In human relationships, when person knows that “s/he is loved and others offered mercy to him or her by others, it will really manifest in the way they

¹ Luke 6:36

² Pope Francis. Message for Lent 2016 “I Desire Mercy, And Not Sacrifice”

relate with others as well. This is a universal truth on human relationships and this truth perhaps can also be applied in their relationship with God and fellow Filipinos.

Malasakit is the Filipino Face of God's mercy. There are many Filipino cultural values that can describe Filipinos as a people but the author chooses *malasakit* as their outstanding value that can best concretize God's mercy not only to their fellow Filipinos but to the whole world.

God's mercy...God having a heart for the miserable

St. Augustine understands the Latin origin of mercy (*misericordia*) as "God's grace that moves every human person from a *miseria ad misericordiam* (from misery to mercy). *Misericordia*, two words with a singular meaning, *miser* miserable and *cordis* is heart. Thus, mercy or *misericordia* is "having a heart for the miserable."³. Therefore, mercy is nothing less than love's response to misery. God's loving heart breaks into every man's story and He redeems them from a life of pain and suffering.

God is "the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation"⁴ and He is "rich in mercy"⁵. It has in it the compassionate grace from the source of all goodness which is given to an undeserving person. God's love is shown in the misery of human life.

Jesus' inclusive love, the Face of God's mercy

The Christian bible attests that Jesus incarnates God as the merciful Father. Pope Francis writes: "Mercy finds its most noble and complete expression in the Incarnate Word. Jesus reveals the face of the Father who is rich in mercy."⁶ In Jesus of Nazareth, mercy has become living and visible. Jesus' entire life and "His person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously.... The signs He works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in Him speaks of mercy. Nothing in Him is devoid of compassion"⁷ In Jesus' preaching using parables, he tells stories about God's infinite mercy: "The Prodigal Son"⁸; "The Lost Sheep"⁹; "The Lost Coin"¹⁰ These parables deal with 'lost', and 'found', and the joyful celebration at the end of each parable that reflects the great joy of God. These parables contain the message of repentance and conversion. It speaks who God is. It is an invitation to enter into the mind of God who seek those who have lost their way to God because of sin. At the same time a call to repent and return to God.

In Jesus' dealing with His people, He was often seen seating at the table with the sinners and outcasts. An opposite attitude was seen among the religious Jewish leaders, the Pharisees. Their rigid observance of purity, their own sense of what God demands of them and the fear of exposing themselves with the affairs of the world,

³ Stravinskas, P. (2016). "First grace of mercy is the grace of conversion"

⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:3

⁵ Ephesians 2:4

⁶ Pope Francis, Message For World Mission Day 2016 "Missionary Church, Witness Of Mercy"

⁷ Pope Francis, (2015 December 8). *Misericordiae Vultus*

⁸ Luke 15:11-32

⁹ Luke 15:1-7

¹⁰ Luke 15:8-10

made them to close their doors to those who are impure and critique those who relate to them. Jesus is often judged of eating with them.¹¹ He defends Himself saying: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”¹² Jesus, the Son of the merciful God knows that every human person is weak and vulnerable. He is aware that they are prone to errors and mistakes. He is aware that they are bound to commit sin. He knows that they can get sick and that they can fall down. God’s mercy is shown in the realities of life most often filled with human weaknesses. The many encounters of Jesus with those presented as “outcasts” have a common message: they are welcome in the Lord’s Table. The experience of meeting Christ gives them the joy and peace that only the mercy of the Lord can offer. Jesus is the good news given to the broken hearted, He is the face of the Father’s mercy to those who are thirsty and hungry of God’s love. He is the good Shepherd who looks at them with love, listens to them with love and leads them to the truth with love. It is a comforting joy to realize that “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”¹³.

Malasakit as a Filipino expression of God’s mercy

The Filipinos are known for their strong family ties. This family-centeredness provides an important understanding of sense of belonging, stability and security. It is from their families that the Filipinos instinctively tie their sense of self-identity. Three local big television networks named their televiewers as *kapatid* (sibling/brother/sister), *kapuso* (one heart), *kapamilya* (one family).

Challenges to Malasakit

This closeness to their families moves them to be person oriented but this orientation at times is based on oneself and one’s kin. It enables them to be personal in relationship, loyal to their family, humane and considerate, respectful and polite. Although it is a positive value, still it makes a Filipino difficult in making judgment. In choosing good from evil, one has the tendency to consider what would this decision bring him or her in return. Also there is an emphasis on whom you know and who knows you rather than a person does. Those who are not within the “family” are strangers and should be regarded with suspicion and care. This highlights the Filipinos’ tendency to be regionalistic as expressed in “*kanya-kanya; atin-atin; kayo-kayo*” mentality (self-serving attitude that generates feeling of envy and competitiveness towards others). A possible influence of having close family ties, regionalistic attitude is evident in the way they relate with others. In most cases, the Filipinos give their trust to those they know, a certain feeling of security comes as one relates more with classmates, co workers, neighbors and to those belonging to one’s own region. This can be the reason why as a nation its difficult for them to be united. A tendency to be influenced by own kin’s or family’s decision is also a glaring reality. In spite of their weakness to have inclination to accommodate only those who belong to their group, still, it shows how Filipinos are basically a relational people. For Jocano, providence or *bahala na* attitude in Filipino context in its negative sense has been condemned as a sign of the pessimistic attitude among the Filipino people. Providence seems to be understood as *kapalaran* (fate), and *swerte*

¹¹ Matthew 11:19

¹² Luke 5:31-32

¹³ Pope Paul VI (1975, May 9). *Gaudate Domino*

(lucky). This attitude is a passive resignation to the will of God. On the other hand, Jose de Mesa affirms *bahala* in its positive sense as an “attitude of hopeful risk-taking as an expression of human freedom to choose its future. He says that *bahala na* which is a passive attitude can be offset by genuine caring effort, *malasakit* which is for Jo de mesa refers to the kind of concern that exerts painful efforts to achieve its purpose. This value can communicate God’s care and concern to today’s Filipinos”¹⁴

Extensions of *Malasakit*

The Filipino value of *makatao* or personalism is visibly expressed in Filipinos’ choice for services and concerns with personal touch. It is noted that good personal relationships done in the spirit of dialogue can solve any problem immediately.”¹⁵ This is visible in any group or community to which they belong.

Filipinos are also known for their being *maawain* (compassionate). As a people, they are generally aware of their history and real life situations. Thus, they think subjectively and is easily affected by the unfortunate situation of others. This explains the Filipino’s tendencies to side with the ‘underdogs’ (anybody who is considered a victim) according to their own perceptions of being a victim.

Another trait that is exceptional among the Filipinos is their hospitality. It shows the people’s capacity to love and accept their visitors at their homes even if the nation’s history of colonization was very painful for them.

Bayanihan highlights the care of Filipinos for one another and their willingness to serve the community¹⁶ This *Bayanihan* spirit manifests Filipinos’ concept of extending help to others in moments of need. Furthermore, the *bayanihan* spirit is still alive and has been showed in many ways, such as when natural calamities strike. Filipinos will go out of their way to help their *kababayans* (fellow men) in need.

Furthermore, in studying *Malasakit* one should take note of *kapwa* “other” as its foundational concept which is literally translated as “other person”. Filipinos use this word to refer not only for strangers but to all relatives, next- door neighbors, and friends. It is a word that embraces all relationships. That’s why they say ‘kapwa-tao’ fellow human being, ‘kapwa manggagawa’ fellow worker, ‘kapwa estudyante’ fellow student. As noted, Filipinos love their family and this love is extended to friends, and other people they considered *hindi na iba* or strangers to them. It defines the Filipinos as naturally compassionate. It empowers them to support others without asking for anything in return. In general, Filipinos are known for their heartfelt concern, nurturing spirit and caring touch. The demands for the overseas workers are one concrete example of these traits.

¹⁴ Jocano, Asal p.11

¹⁵ Jocano, Asal p 11

¹⁶ The concept of *Bayanihan* is traced back to in the Philippine tradition which can be observed in rural areas, wherein the town’s people were asked especially the men to lend a hand to a family who will move into a new place. The relocation does not only involves moving the family’s personal belongings but most importantly it concerns the transfer of the family’s entire house to a new location. A traditional Filipino house (*Bahay Kubo*) is made of indigenous materials such as bamboo and *nipa/anahaw* leaves.

Besides the different studies on Filipino cultural traits by different Anthropologists and Psychologists, an observation was recognized and confirmed by Dr. Roberto Mayorga, a former ambassador of Chile to the Philippines. Concern for others is a noble quality to give Filipinos “strength in times of crisis, a resilient and hopeful spirit and human compassion that prompts them to reach out to *kapwa* during times of calamities.”¹⁷

Malasakit the Dynamic Equivalent of God's mercy

Anscar Chupungco, OSB, an expert in “serving God with public and communal worship”¹⁸ (liturgy), asserts that there is a “dynamic equivalence between faith and culture”¹⁹ Dynamic equivalence is one of the methods of liturgical inculturation used in the translation of the bible and liturgical inculturation. It “re-expresses the living language of a local community by replacing the elements of the gospel value that has an equal value in the culture of the people, and hence can suitably transmit the message intended by the gospel”²⁰ It asserts that there are elements of Jesus’ inclusive love as face of God’s mercy and *malasakit* that cultivate self emptying love, communion and personal accountability. Therefore, Filipino Catholic Christians, by depicting from the richness of their culture, can be authentic messengers of God’s mercy from the examples of Jesus’ inclusive attitude.

The closest equivalent Filipino words for mercy are *awa* and *habag*. Both are everyday human experiences where the heart is touched from within. Where *awa* and *habag* are states of high emotions, there is a better cultural trait where mercy is not fleeting and triggers the heart towards action. Mercy runs deeper than a personal feeling of pity. Mercy, therefore, finds concrete expression in the Filipino cultural value *Malasakit*. It is defined by Jocano as a Filipino’s solicitous concern and selfless service to others. It is a combination of the two Filipino words *sakit* and *malasin*. *Sakit* pertains to any physical, emotional or mental pain or disease. *Malasin* on the other hand means to notice or to look at it intently. Anyone who has *malasakit* towards others, then, is one who worries over somebody else’s sorrow, grief and pain and does something to take them away. This person has this sense of responsibility towards others.²¹ The question is when does the person begin to have *malasakit* towards others? It happens when the person begins to identify himself with others and set aside his own personal interests for someone else’s well-being, needs and concerns. As a relational people, Filipinos drawn their *malasakit* to others from their own personal experiences of *malasakit*.

Indeed, *malasakit* begets *malasakit* It presupposes a proactive response of self to another.

¹⁷ Canares-Yamsuan, C. (2015, December 2). “Concern for others is an outstanding Filipino trait—and this book is out to prove it”

¹⁸ Maxwell-Stewart, C. Fr. (1996, July). *Faith Magazine* “Liturgy: What Does It Mean?”

¹⁹ Anscar, Chupunco, OSB, “Filipino Religious Culture and Liturgical Inculturation” in *Liturgy for the Filipino Church: A Collection of Talks of Anscar J. Chupungco, OSB given at the National Meeting of Diocesan Directors of Liturgy (1986-2004)*, 10

²⁰ Anscar J. Chupungco, OSB, (2016, September). “LITURGICAL INCULTURATION The Future That Awaits Us”

²¹ Phildom. (2017, August) ‘Dominican Mission Month’.

As a lived cultural value of God's mercy, *malasakit* wears many different faces. Lack of opportunities and poverty are the main drivers why many Filipino leave their families and work abroad. The desire to secure a better future for their children drives many parents to put their own lives at risk in the hands of unscrupulous, illegal recruitment agencies, and abusive foreign employers. The same goes with workers or employees who are willing to work extra hours to finish the responsibility given to them and would exercise prudence in their decisions in the use of company resources in cash or in kind.

Jesus' table fellowship is a fellowship of welcoming people. There is an element of care and concern for those who regarded as outcasts and sinners in the society. In *malasakit*, an OFW who gives the concern identifies himself or herself to their loved ones who are in need of financial support, thus the 'other' person is not actually the 'other' but an extension of oneself. The Filipino overseas workers best exemplify the best of Filipino culture which is the face of mercy Christ wears.

Moreover, the downpour of assistance and support to affected families after typhoon Yolanda or storm Haiyan is another face of mercy where Filipinos from all walks of life, and from other countries, stood hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder to give beyond what they have. This is indeed a realization that nobody is too poor to have nothing to share.

The attitude of *malasakit* moves the person to do something to alleviate the person from his or her present difficult situation, Jesus' words of inviting people to dine with him is the first step to affirm their uniqueness as a person and their willingness to receive His grace. *Malasakit* mirrors Jesus' attitude of care and concern for those who are in need. It is the Filipino's way of saying God cares²². This care manifests itself in God's Divine providence. Therefore, *malasakit* is a grace from God that enables a Filipino to act with *malasakit* on others. The source and origin and initiative of *malasakit* is God. It cultivates self-emptying love like Jesus who reached out to the outcasts, being one with others recognizing them as children of God also and an exercise of freedom to make a choice to offer and receive help and therefore a personal accountability. In this way, the cultural value *malasakit* becomes a Christian value as well.

CONCLUSION

It is without doubt that God's mercy is fully revealed in Jesus' inclusive love. Jesus indeed is the face of God's mercy. Any encounter with Jesus then, is and, always will be, an experience of inclusive love. Therefore, only a love that gives oneself like Jesus can make *malasakit* a true cultural value that bears the face of God's mercy. It is Divine love in action.

In the final words of Jean Valjean in Les Miserables, he said: "To love another person is to see the face of God".

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