

*An Appraisal of the Filipino Catholic Devotion to the Black Nazarene in the Light of
New Evangelization*

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Abstract

Popular devotions are reflections and expressions of the people's faith. They are expressions of how people recognize God in their lives, and as a shared experience, they foster expressions of devotion and thus become a manifestation of prayer. Popular devotions as forms of prayer and worship do not contradict the Sacred Liturgy but are acknowledged as legitimate by the Apostolic See. Moreover, popular devotions, in general, lead to the cultivation of some values. One of the most popular devotions among Filipino Catholics is the devotion to the Black Nazarene, a life-sized statue of Jesus Christ kneeling on one knee carrying the cross-dressed in a maroon robe. His face is marked with wounds and blood. His head is crowned with thorns with three gold-plated metal rays on the top of his head, with his eyes looking up to heaven. The Black Nazarene devotion balances Christology from below and above, i.e., Christ does not remain crucified. Instead, he brings the hope of resurrection to those who fervently approach him with faith, hope, and love. It suffices to say that the Black Nazarene serves as a means for the Filipino faithful to encounter Christ in their lives. Given this, this paper aims to appraise the Black Nazarene Devotion as a means that contributes to the New Evangelization among Filipino Catholics. More specifically, this paper seeks to answer how the devotion to the Black Nazarene aids Filipino Catholics in their desire to sustain and grow in their faith.

Keywords: Black Nazarene, Popular Devotion, New Evangelization

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Introduction

Christianity in the Philippines has spread so many devotions that influenced Filipino cultures. Black Nazarene is one of the many popular devotions in the Philippines that call people into conversion and religious zeal. Devotions serve as one of the ways of evangelizing the Filipino Catholics, reflecting on the lives of the icon, witnessing the miracles, and joining the other faithful to live out the values taught. Devotions have a significant role in strengthening one's faith and relationship with God. However, not all devotees know and understand the backgrounds of their practices, their more profound meaning, and their importance in how it contributes to evangelization.

It is essential to note the place of devotions in the evangelization of the Catholic Church. The researcher will be using a qualitative approach/methodology in the study. This paper focuses on the devotion to the Black Nazarene in the light of the new evangelization. It aims to answer the following questions: *What is the Black Nazarene devotion? What are the historical and sociological aspects of the Black Nazarene? What are the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding popular devotions? How does the Black Nazarene devotion serve as a means that contributes to the New Evangelization among Filipino Catholics? What is good about popular devotions? What are the negative practices or beliefs that need to be clarified? Lastly, what are the recommendations to the people regarding the devotion?*

Historical and Sociological Aspects of the Black Nazarene

History tells us that the Black Nazarene is known to be sculpted by a Mexican sculptor and was transported to Manila on May 31, 1606, during the Spanish period by the first group of the Order of the Augustinian Recollects (OAR) by a galleon. It was first kept in the Bagumbayan church, which is now Rizal Park. It was transferred again to a bigger church of the Augustinians in Intramuros in 1608. By order of the Archbishop of Manila, Basilio Sancho Junta y Rufina, the image was transferred to the Quiapo Church under the patronage of Saint John the Baptist. On April 20, 1650, it obtained Papal approval from Pope Innocent X. The image survived many crises like fire in 1790 and 1920 that destroyed the Quiapo Church, earthquakes in 1645 and 1863, and the World War II bombing in 1945.¹

Most Filipino devotees are not overly concerned about its origin or history, but they only focus on their hope that their petitions may be granted. They may be helped in their struggles in life and witness miracles. Other devotees consider practices to be a way for them to share His passion and offer their lives to Him. This devotion could be the reason why, every day, especially during its feast day, it's flocked by thousands or millions of people.

Countless people wait in line and try their best to reach the image of the Nazarene. During the procession, people witness blood and sweat. People faint and are injured because of the crowdedness, yet they continue trying to pass their towels to touch the Black Nazarene. Why do large crowds gather at its feast, processions, and shrine? Where did their energy, joy, and devotion come from?

Sociologist Clifford Sorita said in his article "*Understanding the Devotion of the Black Nazarene*" that the devotion comes from a deep-rooted personal experience with the Divine

¹ <https://www.esquiremag.ph/culture/lifestyle/black-nazarene-the-tale-of-traslacion-a1729-20190109-lfrm> (accessed on June 8, 2021)

whereby a pilgrim undergoes a direct experience of the sacred, either in the material aspect of miraculous healing and acquisition of various temporal needs or in the immaterial aspect of the inward transformation of spirit and personality. It is a personal and communitarian religious experience.

Regarding the methodology in understanding the Christological aspects of Popular Devotions, they are described as much more rooted in a Christology from below. Christology from below means its starting point is from the *historical Jesus*. Historical Jesus and generic approach start from below, but we still uphold the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. They come from the people themselves, touching their lives and inspiring them. There is an emphasis here on the earthly life of Jesus, his words of preaching with the apostles, and his actions performed to the people of Israel. In this method, it answers how much of the ordinary life of Jesus affected and influence Christian believers in their practice of faith and expressions. We give more focus here on Jesus' way of life with the Israelites, being a simple man living with his parents in Nazareth before he started his ministry, his human aspects of maturity, intelligence, and behavioral development. We encountered Him in the Gospel as a person who "continued to grow and to become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the favor of God was upon Him." (c.f. Luke 2: 40). He was not exempted from the sufferings of daily life, immune from the pain and daily hardships to earn a living and survive a day. Because of this in his ministry, he became too sensitive to the needs of the people, in the fight for justice and the restoration of everyone's dignity, in healing their sickness, and fighting for their rights. He suffered from the people of Israel, lifted their dignity, and preached the Kingdom of God to whosoever was willing to accept his call of discipleship and conversion. We don't disregard here his Divinity as the Son of God and the miracles he performed.

Another method of understanding devotions is through Christology from above. Christology from above teaches us that Christ, because of his love for humanity, suffers, died, and destroyed death and sin. Christology from above means it is an approach whose starting point is from the dogmatic claims of our faith. Son of eternal God (second person of the trinity)/ it is a dogmatic approach (It's dangerous because we can end up just spiritualizing Jesus. To start from dogma, without strong historical foundations, would be superficial and unrealistic (memorizing without critical thinking). Devotion is one of the Christian ways of trying to reach and experience God in some simple ways of forms of prayer and practices like touching the robes and body parts of the statues of saints, attending novena masses, and fiesta mass, pilgrimages, offering intentions, etc. Others knew them as popular spirituality, popular religiosity, a religion of the people, and the widespread religious sense.² The focus permanently resides in the word "Popular," which means the "People," or the "People of God." These devotions are continuously "loved" and "cherished" by the people.³ Christology from below or above is a matter of methodology on how we go about the study of Jesus Christ. With the said methodologies, we need to make sure to have a balance between the two to avoid too much emphasis on the humanity of Jesus to the point of disregarding his Divinity and vice versa. Popular devotions serve as a bridge of experiencing both methodologies in becoming closer to God and in having a deeper relationship with Him.

² Austin J. Lindsay, C.S.Sp., "Popular Piety: Link Between Priest and People," *Priest*, March 1983, 40.

³ Bernhard Raas, SVD, *Popular Devotions Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 1992), 15.

Significance of the Black Nazarene Devotion to New Evangelization in the Philippine Context

Through the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church learned her very own missionary nature and continuously renewed her way of evangelization throughout the time, adjusting to the signs of the times, and giving weight to the rise of new issues concerning the World and in the Church's way of life. The need for evangelization was emphasized in the Church's document "*ad Gentes*" (to the World). The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said: "Church's *ad Gentes* ('to the world') mission given to her by Christ is the proclamation of the Good News to those who do not know him. The historical and social circumstances of the twentieth century prompted the Church to renew her mission to evangelize."⁴

It was given importance again by Pope Paul VI in his writing, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, as he stated one of the purposes of the Church's existence: to evangelize, preach and teach, and be a channel of God's grace and forgiveness.⁵ Saint John Paul II renewed the call for evangelization in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Saint John Paul II first used the term "New Evangelization" in 1983, addressing the Catholic Bishops of Latin America in Haiti.

Here, the Black Nazarene in the Philippines enters with its ardor and passion. The influence of the devotion must not remain just a mere attraction but must lead to conversion and renewal of faith and love for God and others. The New Evangelization does not only mean carrying out the Gospel but also deepening one's relationship of the faithful and the Church, application of the teachings in the Second Vatican II, and inculturation of what is already present, accompanying every faithful towards the Christian way of life leading them to repentance and love of God.

For the celebration of 500 years' presence of Catholic Faith in the Philippines, the Black Nazarene has already been considered a gift to Filipinos in strengthening their faith and closeness to God. Having been enculturated in the Filipino Catholics' lives, the Catholic Faith always finds its place in the hearts and minds of devotees. The Black Nazarene became already a part of the lives of the faithful, renewing them from their faith and purifying them from their doubts, trials, and daily Christian lives. Pope Francis acknowledged the importance of such devotion in the process of enculturation and evangelization of faith in the culture of a community.

The Black Nazarene serves as one way of inculturating the Christian faith to Filipinos and also serves as a new form of evangelization as it proclaims Jesus Christ Himself and gives way to devotees to have personal experience with Him. Devotees of the Black Nazarene are usually the poor, those suffering from different kinds of sickness, and those answered in their prayers. The common people (poor) and usually men shared their sorrows with Christ carrying his Cross. The devotion to the Black Nazarene is different because it is Jesus Christ himself, whom the devotee adores. People are kept on coming back because of their faith, giving thanks to Him, and expressing their gratitude to God through their passion for

⁴ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis United States Conference of Catholic Bishops., *Disciples Called to Witness The New Evangelization*, 2012., (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), p.5.

⁵ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Evangelization in the Modern World (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), 8 December 1975, Vatican archive., https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html. no. 14

devotion. They believe that because of their devotion, their petitions were granted. In exchange for it, they wanted to repay by participating and attending annually the feast days and special occasions of the Black Nazarene. The Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines stated: "We see in this Jesus one who can identify with us in our poverty, sufferings, and oppression; one who can reach out to us as a forgiving and healing Savior in our weaknesses and failings."⁶

It is in this religious experience that the concept of "*Panata*" started. It is a vow or promise where devotees and pilgrims would repeatedly come back to renew this spiritual encounter. It was also a challenge to the devotees that even after the experience, their faith and formation must continue in their ordinary lives or else it will just become a mere fanaticism. The image shows itself as a figure of Christ who is so close to the poor and the suffering that Christ himself was poor who accepted conviction and death on the Cross.

Furthermore, on the Black Nazarene, they see a Jesus who is so human, ever-loving, and willing to stay with them and a God who is so merciful in forgiving them their sins, healing them from their sickness, and liberating them from the society full of biases and classes. The image helps them identify themselves with God, who is also suffering from them, and feel solidarity. It is difficult for the poor to have thought of Jesus Christ as the King, but a God who became man too and redeemed by their sins liberated them from the sufferings they experience, like healing their sickness and preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus, who is God, became human for Him to be with us. People also take devotion as their chance and a way to express their solidarity with the Christ who offered himself.

Other traditional practices were revolving around the image, namely: *Pahalik* (kissing of the statues), *Pasindi* (lighting of multi-colored candles outside of the Church), *Padasal* (from the devotee or the Priests), *Pabihis* (the changing of the garments of the Black Nazarene), *Pabendision* (sprinkling of Holy Water after masses or the kissing of the hands of the priests), *Pahawak* (touching of the statues or the garments of the Black Nazarene), *Pamisa* (Mass Offerings), *Pagnonobena* (Novena prayers or masses), *Pagpasan* (Carrying of the wood of the carroza or the rope attached to it), *Pagyayapak* (walking barefoot during processions), *Paglalakad ng Paluhod* (processing to the altar on bended knees)

New Evangelization and Popular Devotions

Pope Francis invited the faithful to a renewal of their profession of faith amidst the changes happening around them and encourage them to respond to the need to continuously evangelize the World and open themselves to encounter the Lord. In his Exhortation, he mentioned that "Whenever we make an effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's World. Every form of authentic evangelization is always 'new.'"⁷

⁶ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*. (Manila: CBCP, 1997), no. 555.

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*), 24 November 2013, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed on February 27, 2020), no. 11.

Evangelization is a call for conversion. Devotion to the Black Nazarene is a call for faithful to conversion, continuous renewal of faith, repentance from sin, and living out of Christian values with the example of Jesus' actions. "The proclamation of the Word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith. Conversion is a gift of God, a work of the Blessed Trinity."⁸ A devotee should not remain to evangelize by attraction, which means participating in different activities of the Black Nazarene without understanding them and without a total change of heart. During the feast day of the Black Nazarene, many people are joining yet; the question is how many among them understand what they are doing? A lot of people attend, and how many will remain to evangelize fully? That means they will carry out the invitation of conversion in their daily lives.

Insights, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Insights

In the light of the New Evangelization, there are prevailing problems regarding devotions in general and the Black Nazarene that challenge the ministers and pastoral leaders. There is always a need for renewal and purification to avoid confusion and conflicts with faith. Popular devotions are loved much by the people and readily appreciated because of their lively component that could easily be adapted more than Liturgy, seemingly experienced as tedious and limited. Liturgy seems to be so far and unattractive to ordinary people looking for consolation. Most devotions have their days in a week where there will be novena or mass in honor of the image, which for others becomes more special than that of Sunday mass celebration. Others faithfully attend the special practices/festivals allotted to the devotion rather than Liturgy itself.

Over-emphasizing the devotion leads the faithful to some misconceptions of their image of God as there is a promise attached to the devotion, the person fulfills the ritual/ practice to gain favor on God, "I do something so that God will give me."⁹ The faithful narrows down his/ her understanding of God, having a false image of God who rewards whoever does/practices something and receives nothing for those who do nothing. It changes the motivation of the faithful.

Having enough education is the best solution to the problem. Learning from its history and earlier practices will give the faithful a stronger conviction of their devotions. Pope Francis said: "we need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel, which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness."¹⁰ Giving the devotees ample time to catechize them, explaining the basic teachings of faith, Liturgy, basic concepts of

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (*Redemptoris Missio*), 7 December 1990, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (accessed on March 8, 2020), no. 46.

⁹ Bernhard Raas, SVD, *Popular Devotions Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 1992). 27.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*), 24 November 2013, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed on February 27, 2020), no. 34.

God's images and devotion, incorporating them in their sermons, recollections, talks, and pastoral visits, giving symposium and theological hours concerning the Black Nazarene. Popular devotions, in general, are influencing a lot of faithful in the strengthening of their faith. Some have their devotions inherited from their parents, or others vowed to practice such devotion for reasons they associated, like healing from sickness or becoming successful in life. For some faithful, they follow devotions without having a grounded knowledge of the practices. Problems or dangers arise when there is already an over-emphasis and attention on the devotion than the Liturgy itself when there is no real transformation in their lives, as Fr. Bernhard Raas, SVD said.¹¹

Obligations

Pastoral leaders should carefully watch and analyze some practices given more priority than the Liturgy and study the best action they should take. The Philippines' Black Nazarene image always attracts and gathers thousands, millions of people on its every feast day and other special occasions. Regarding this particular devotion, there were many mythical beliefs and prevailing ignorance about it, which must be corrected according to theologian Msgr. Sabino A. Vengco, Jr. clarified that it is wrong to celebrate its feast on January 9 as it is "out of season" in the Liturgical calendar. January 9 is still part of the Christmas season. Msgr. Vengco asks: "How can you be celebrating the birth and the coming of Jesus when already he is there bowed down beneath the weight of the cross?" He continued by saying that the celebration is "in violation of the fundamental principle that any popular devotion must harmonize with the liturgy and must lead the people, the faithful, into the liturgy."¹²

Devotees should always be advised and reminded to avoid any excessive practices and expressions that would harm themselves and are not demanded by anyone. Different gestures and observations equipped with the understanding and background knowledge are exemplary. A word grounded in faith and trust in God is good, but too much exaggeration to the point of getting hurt must be reflected upon as what always happens in the event "*Traslacion*." Msgr. Vengco also explained that January 9 transferred the image from Intramuros to Quiapo, which has no connection to the image portrayed. The Black Nazarene depicting Christ carrying the Cross initially during the Spanish era is celebrated during the Lenten Season and must be as Msgr. Vengco stated. He was also concerned about the Black Nazarene's excessive practice that had already become "superstitious, fanatical and even idolatrous." Most people are eager to touch the image during the procession and even throw their towels and ask to wipe the image.

It is a challenge for the faithful to be evangelized not only by attraction but by conversion. What are the tasks of the Church to keep the fire on devotions and contribute to the new evangelization? It should all begin with the ministers and pastoral leaders taking care of the images and other priests and catechists. Evangelization should start with the leaders. Saint John Paul II said: "We cannot preach conversion unless we are converted anew every day."¹³ Evangelization through devotion must always lead the faithful to conversion, which should

¹¹ Bernhard Raas, SVD, *Popular Devotions Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 1992), 26.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio)*, 7 December 1990, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (accessed on March 5, 2020), no. 47.

happen first among the leaders. Having a positive attitude towards popular devotions, specifically the Black Nazarene, must also be considered. Having great respect and appreciation towards the people and careful observance of their practices and reasons must be given priority to the ministers and pastoral leaders. Why are they practicing them? What are the prevailing reasons for their devotions? With these questions in mind, they will enable themselves to have a mutual understanding of the devotion and the people themselves.¹⁴

After the observation, a thorough reflection and discernment could begin with the help of theological inquiry and historical research. Only with these methods can ministers and pastoral leaders have the right decision on how to purify, recommend, or even stop such devotion. Excessive practice and ignorance will always lead to superstitions and shallow beliefs. Pastoral leaders and priests should have adequate historical and theological knowledge of devotions such as the Black Nazarene and the beauty of the Liturgy.¹⁵

They should encourage everyone to participate more in celebrating the real presence of God, the Eucharist. Having an active, alive, and participative Liturgy will draw more people to appreciate the Eucharist and other sacraments. Popular devotions are in touch with the people. The Black Nazarene is portraying an image of commonality with others, continuously drawing people toward Him. Ministers and pastoral leaders need to know the people's needs, wishes, and desires, especially the poor. In the celebration of the Liturgy, priests could integrate the needs of the people in the intentions, introductory words, homilies, and prayers of the faithful.¹⁶

What are the obligations and rightful attitudes the devotees must observe? The faithful are always looking for something that could quench their thirst for divinity, the longing for the absolute healing of their brokenness. They are a people whose love for the Lord usually depends on the external activities they do, like the devotions, and on the outcome or fruit of their faith after the practice. Black Nazarene is a kind of Christology unifying the Christology from below and above. There should always be a balance of the two, a Christ who does not remain crucified but also brings hope to everyone for their resurrection; in the end, having basic catechisms and knowledge of the devotion and Liturgy should always remind us what the proper practices of the devotions are and avoid excesses.

Conclusion

The Black Nazarene is a powerful image of God who is in solidarity with the poor in their poverty and suffering, and it is the same God who gives them hope that someday, their poverty and suffering will end. Conversion, commitment, and renewal to the life of Jesus must always be the end of the devotion; without transformation, the devotion will remain an external activity leading to fanaticism, externalism, and sentimentalism; then, the faithful are just evangelized by attraction. Devotion to the Black Nazarene is not a one-time event but an everyday challenge of renewal and conversion. It involves social responsibility and morality. Holy images or statues should not be worshiped, and instead, be accorded "respectful veneration." There should be an emphasis on the broader community.

¹⁴ Bernhard Raas, SVD, *Popular Devotions Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 1992), 28- 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

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