

Filipinos' devotion is heroic but it needs to be purified.



There is no stopping Julian Vincent Mendoza, a 30-year-old father of three, from fulfilling a vow he made seven years ago. He, along with his wife and three children, waded through a sea of bodies, all devotees of the Black Nazarene in Manila's Quiapo district. Julian's aim, like that of the mammoth crowd of about nine million at this year's feast, is to touch the statue or grab the rope used to pull the carriage carrying the image during the 15-hour procession.

The suffocating heat, the smell of the undulating crowd that sways left, then right, forward and backwards, like an ocean current that has lost direction, are nothing compared to the people's fanatical devotion to the wooden life-size statue of Jesus Christ, that was brought to the Philippines from Mexico by Augustinian friars in 1606. Police Captain Rodolfo Samoranos vows to protect the Black Nazarene for as long as he lives. He claims his prayers for his son who suffered from leukemia were answered. "With God's mercy, he is now healthy. This is not only a miracle. Jesus granted our wish because of our firm relationship with Him," the 51-year-old says.

But Monsignor Jose Clemente Ignacio, parish priest of Quiapo district, says "there are things that still need to be purified" in people's expressions of faith. "Human as they are, our expressions need to achieve their perfection," he says, citing superstition and even occultism in the devotion of people. He admits that Church leaders have to work harder for devotees to understand their faith and put it in the right perspective.

"With proper formation, we hope the devotees could experience more the love of God in their lives and realize their faith," Ignacio says. He, however, warns those who question the apparent fanaticism of the faithful not to make judgments. "We must first understand why people express their faith the way they do," adding that "those who could judge better about these acts of religiosity are those who understand fully the heart of the devotee."

”Award-winning filmmaker Jim Libiran says Filipino still believe in miracles despite studies in other countries, especially in the West, that suggest belief in, for instance, healing by touching or even touching a cloth that has touched a sacred image is in decline

. "A significant portion of our tourism and wellness industry rests on the healing, relaxing and rejuvenating power of touch. If you don't believe me, you can experience it yourself by going to one of the 75 spa centers near your house," says the director of the internationally-acclaimed film Tribu (Tribe). He says that one does not have to be a devout member of any creed, cult or political party, to understand that “we are a tactile tribe.” He says only those who are mere spectators, "not a participant of the collective action or ritual," see the Black Nazarene as a mere wooden statue.

Power and power-relations are based on perception, he says, adding that the Black Nazarene has become, to the eyes of its devotees, "a living embodiment of a collective desire, a loyal and patient friend, a hero, a champion, an idol, a leader, a tribal head, a God." "Take away the religious trappings and look at the behavior, motivation, the characteristics of the ritualistic phenomenon, and what do you have? A Michael Jackson concert, or a Manny Pacquiao fight, or a parade of stars," Libiran says.

Fr Christian Buenafe, head of the Carmelite Order in the Philippines, says the practice of touching or kissing images "is a cultural behavior" that has become part of the symbols and rituals of most religions. "Unfortunately, some people go to the extreme that they no longer differentiate worship from veneration," he says. Traditions are ways and practices that result from the evolution of history that are re-lived, celebrated, innovated, and continued. Buenafe says the varied faith-experiences of millions of devotees can be subjected to scholarly scrutiny, but common to all these is the experience of healing, because devotees believe that "Jesus is reachable and approachable." Ignacio says it is an Asian trait to believe the presence of the Divine in sacred objects and places.

"We all know we don't worship statues. We worship God, and if these statues would 'bridge us to God,' then we want to connect with God using these statues," he says. Ignacio, however, admits that he is still trying to understand "the heart and the life" of the devotee, adding that the lack of doctrinal understanding of people's faith is not their fault but is due to the "lack of opportunities for formation" that should be provided by the Church. "We have tried to reach out to the mamamasans [devotees pulling the ropes], but we are only scratching the surface," he says.

On the other hand, Ignacio says that from the perspective of ordinary parishioners, one can feel the intensity and sincerity of their devotion. "Maybe, the theological community has not yet fully understood the soul and spirituality of Filipinos. Maybe, our theological paradigms are too Western that is why we easily judge about the piety of our devotees." For Julian Vincent Mendoza and Rodolfo Samoranos, however, no amount of academic or theological discussion can dissuade them from delving into the sweating multitude. "I am grateful because the Black Nazarene granted my wish to have a son," Julian says. "My eldest child also almost died from a sickness, but through prayers she recovered."

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