

2018

## Laudato Si's call for dialogue with indigenous peoples: A cultural insider's response from the Christianized indigenous communities of the Philippines

Gaston Kibiten

*Saint Louis University*, gpkibiten@slu.edu.ph

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity>

ISSN: 1839-0366

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

This material has been copied and communicated to you by or on behalf of the University of Notre Dame Australia pursuant to part VB of the Copyright Act 1969 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

### Recommended Citation

Kibiten, Gaston (2018) "Laudato Si's call for dialogue with indigenous peoples: A cultural insider's response from the Christianized indigenous communities of the Philippines," *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol8/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics* by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



---

## Laudato Si's call for dialogue with indigenous peoples: A cultural insider's response from the Christianized indigenous communities of the Philippines

### Abstract

Picking up from *Laudato Si's* suggestion to dialogue with indigenous peoples in line with its urgent call to address the current ecological crisis, this paper interrogates the Catholic Church's complicity in undermining the cultures of indigenous peoples in the Philippines. It argues that the matter has to be revisited and acted upon accordingly, as this remains a challenge to the relations between the indigenous communities and the Church, including their common advocacy for environmental care. As a case for discussion, the paper presents an autoethnographic analysis of the Church's proselytization of the indigenous Kankanaeys of the Cordillera region, focusing on how this process undercut and transformed the people's worldview and religion, and eroded their traditional relations with nature. From the autoethnographic case, the paper proposes several lines of action that can be considered in dialogue by the Church and the indigenous Christian communities: a Church-wide formal apology and rectification of wrongs, radical inculturation, integration of indigenous deities and spirits, and shaping up an indigenous-Christian ecological ethos. These measures, aside from mitigating the lingering impact of Christian conversion on indigenous cultures, could pave the way towards better partnership between the two parties in today's environmental politics in the country.

## ***Laudato Si's* call for dialogue with indigenous peoples: A cultural insider's response from the Christianized indigenous communities of the Philippines**

**Gaston P. Kibiten**

### **Introduction**

*Laudato Si* is pitching for an inclusive dialogue in order to address collaboratively the ecological crisis besetting our planet. Towards this, the encyclical lays down directions for dialogue and calls on various parties and sectors to engage in these.<sup>1</sup> Of all groups, the indigenous peoples are singled out as 'the principal dialogue partners.'<sup>2</sup> This is not just for the fact that these are often vulnerable victims to externally initiated projects, but also because of their deeply-rooted values and practices that are environmentally sound.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the Philippines, which is home to various indigenous groups, much initiative has already been undertaken by the Catholic Church to reach out in dialogue with indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> Beyond and alongside dialogue, the Church has a long-standing engagement with the indigenous peoples and their causes. In 1975, the Church, through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), has set up a full-pledged commission on indigenous peoples to highlight the importance of its relations with these groups. The commission, eventually named as Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples, has since been actively supporting indigenous peoples in their various issues. On several occasions, the Church (through the leadership of outspoken bishops, clergy, and religious) has stood by the indigenous peoples in the latter's defense of their ancestral domain and resources against powerful commercial interests (mining, logging, and agri-business) and large-scale state development projects.<sup>5</sup> This dates back to the Marcos regime in the 1970s-1980s with landmark cases like the Cellophil logging concessions among the Tinguians, and the Chico River dams among the Bontoks and Kalingas, all indigenous groups in the Cordillera region in northern Luzon. This activist accompaniment by the Church continues to date among indigenous groups in various parts of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the Church's active ministry and partnership with indigenous peoples, there is one problematique that continues to hound the relations between the two, and along which further dialogue and action must be pursued. This has to do with the Church's complicity in undermining the indigenous cultures particularly in terms of their worldview and religion, an issue that has only been recently acknowledged by the Church in the Philippines.<sup>7</sup> The matter comes into sharp relief in light of *Laudato Si's* call to dialogue

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, (24 May 2015). See Chapter 5, "Lines of Approach and Action."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 146.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of these can be found in Leonardo N. Mercado, *Meeting the Spirituality of Indigenous Peoples: A Mindanao Experience* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the CBCP pastoral statements, namely, Bsp. Carmelo Morelos, *1993 - Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, (January 25, 1993) Tagaytay City; and, Bsp. Oscar V. Cruz, *Indigenous Peoples and the Church Journeying Towards the Great Jubilee*, (January 28, 1999), Tagaytay City.

<sup>6</sup> This engagement with indigenous peoples is shared with other Christian denominations like the Philippine Episcopal Church, the Philippine Independent Church, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, among others.

<sup>7</sup> See statement of the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples on the occasion of its 28<sup>th</sup> convention in 2010.

with the indigenous peoples, presumably to learn from and build on the latter's pro-environmental ethos and lifestyle. But quite ironically – as this paper will argue – the traditional worldviews and religions that underpinned the indigenous peoples' generally commensal and reverential relations with nature have in fact been largely destabilized by the Church itself as it converted these peoples into its fold. This predicament calls to mind the point of 'imperialist nostalgia,' whereby colonialists (and their heirs like the Church) pine for things of the past whose demise they themselves have contributed to.<sup>8</sup>

Daunting as the task may appear, the Church and the Christianized indigenous peoples themselves must address this issue in the spirit of genuine dialogue if they have to move forward as better partners in their common advocacy for environmental care. But where and how exactly should the parties start? The Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples, in its general assembly statements during its 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> conventions in 2009 and 2010, respectively, has already outlined a general agenda that is relevant to the task. This included facilitating inculturation among the baptized Catholic indigenous peoples, understanding the indigenous peoples' worldview and way of life, and appreciating and affirming their creation spirituality, among others. These are indeed important steps in the right direction. However, these are broad lines of action that have to be fleshed out and pursued in details on the ground.

Along this line, we need fine-grained case studies among the indigenous groups concerned in order to have a thorough appreciation of realities and upon which to base more specific and appropriate interventions. And this will have to be done at the level of individual Christianized indigenous groups, considering that worldviews and religious practice have their own unique configurations across ethnic groups. The same can be said of these groups' experience of Christianization or relations with the Church, which again have nuances from group to group owing to their particular histories and socio-cultural realities.

This paper aims to contribute to this process by looking into the experience of Christianization among the Kankanaeys, one of the indigenous groups in the Cordillera highlands of northern Philippines, as a case to shed light on how the Church challenged and impaired indigenous worldviews and religions, and likewise to underscore the adverse consequences of this to the group and the Church itself. As compared to the Philippine lowland ethnic groups that were Christianized much earlier during the Spanish rule, the Cordillera ethnic groups were converted to Christianity only during the early decades of the American regime going into the Second World War. Thus, their experience is relatively recent and more accessible for scrutiny.

From the case presented, the paper shall identify specific lines of action that the ethnic group and the Church can consider in their ongoing dialogue and partnership. While the immediate context will be that of the Christianized Kankanaey communities of the Cordillera region, the insights brought forth should be of relevance to other Christianized indigenous communities in the country or elsewhere. Moreover, while the paper focuses around the relationship between the Church and the Christianized indigenous groups, the discussion may have implications, too, for the relations between the Church and the indigenous groups that are not Christians or have chosen to keep to their own traditional religions.

---

<sup>8</sup> Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989): 107-122.

To build its case, the study relies on an autoethnographic approach due to the paucity of materials on the experience of Christianization from the perspective of the natives especially in the Cordillera setting. Most accounts available are from the missionaries themselves,<sup>9</sup> and the few materials written by locals are also limited to describing the formal establishment of mission areas and the development of Christian communities.<sup>10</sup> Thus, accounts that channel the in-depth experience of cultural insiders are a must in order to balance the picture.

Autoethnography as a method in qualitative research began in the 1970s but has since gained traction among researchers across the humanities and social sciences. With its increasing use and popularity, the method has taken on various definitions, types, and strands. Its use in this paper comes out evidently in the text's partiality for cultural criticism and reflection towards positive action and social change.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the paper is an autoethnographic text on two senses: First, the writer belongs to the group whose realities he is trying to represent; and, second, it puts emphasis on personal experience and reflection as basis for making sense of social and cultural realities.

While the paper uses mainly the self as data source, which is a major question leveled against the method, the text does not simply dissipate into plain narcissism as feared by critics.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it marshals personal data as catalyst for interrogating the broader socio-cultural issue at hand. Moreover, while the autobiographical data may not square up to the standard of generalizability per positivist research conventions, the text stands to be judged instead according to how much it resonates with the lives and experiences of other subjects, and how much it evokes reflection and action among readers.<sup>13</sup>

## I. The Christianization of Kankanaeys: Experience and view from within

Christianity, or Catholicism to be more specific, was established in the Philippines as an integral part of Spanish colonization in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of three centuries, Spanish missionaries were able to convert most of the lowland Philippine populations in Luzon and the Visayas. However, they were not able to do this with a number of ethnic groups, generally those in the uplands of Mindanao, the Cordillera region and Palawan in Luzon, and some islands in the Visayas. These groups either fiercely resisted both colonization and Christianization<sup>14</sup> or were scarcely reached by the Spaniards.<sup>15</sup>

Christianization, as a colonial project, was underpinned by the prevailing worldview among the Europeans then that Christianity was the only true religion and the rest were

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the CICM missionaries have recorded their endeavors in the serial magazine entitled *Little Apostle of the Mountain Province*, renamed later as *The Apostle of the Mountain Province*.

<sup>10</sup> See Fernando Bautista Sr., "The Christianization of the Vicariate of the Mountain Province," in *The Golden Jubilee Book of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Mountain Province*, 28-33, (Baguio City, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> On the political character of autoethnography, see Patricia Clough, "Comments on setting criteria for experimental writing," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 278-291.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this criticism, see Amanda Coffey, *The ethnographic self* (London: Sage, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> These two considerations are part of the criteria proposed for the assessment of autoethnographic works. See Laurel Richardson, "Evaluating ethnography," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 253-255; and, Arthur P. Bochner, "Criteria against ourselves," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 266-272.

<sup>14</sup> For the case of the Igorots in the Cordilleras, see William Henry Scott, "Igorot Responses to Spanish Aims: 1576-1896," *Philippine Studies* 18, no. 4 (1970): 695-717.

<sup>15</sup> See case of the Tedurays in South Cotabato, Mindanao, in Stuart A. Schlegel, *Wisdom from a Rainforest: The Spiritual Journey of an Anthropologist* (Ateneo de Manila Press, 2000).

pagan, superstitious or downright evil.<sup>16</sup> It was believed that all those not baptized into the Church were damned, thus by all means the missionaries had to convert the natives into Christianity. Moreover, Christianization was also intimately linked with the idea of development signified by the trappings of European culture, thus the Filipino natives had to adapt to the colonizers' material accoutrements, language, and practices. Such colonial-cum-religious mindset and practice have not changed much when the Americans took over as colonizers at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the case of the Cordillera region, the indigenous groups were subdued and 'pacified' in the early 1900s through the Americans' military power and superior technology.<sup>17</sup> That period also saw more missionaries pouring in from Europe and the USA (mainly Protestants for the latter) to continue the work of Christian evangelization left behind by the Spaniards. It was then that Christian proselytization began systematically and aggressively among the upland indigenous groups in the Cordilleras.<sup>18</sup>

Christianization was in full swing over the entire Kankanaey culture area at the heartland of the Cordilleras during the decades before World War II.<sup>19</sup> After the war, and around 1950s, the ethnic population has more or less been converted to Christianity (either Catholic or Protestant), except a few dissident families and elderlies who stuck to the traditional religion. At that time, formal baptism into the Christian churches would have been the norm, although the traditional worldview and practices were still in place. By the 1960s, the decline in traditional religious beliefs and practices was already evident and irreversible.

It was in that setting where I was born and grew up, particularly in the municipality of Bauko, Mountain Province. The decades of the 1970s-1980s, which I spent as a kid and teenager, were a period of great transformation in Kankanaey society and culture. As documented elsewhere, this process was jointly abetted by the American colonial functionaries and the Christian missionaries.<sup>20</sup> It was a complex process, but the major drivers of change – aside from military control by the American forces – were the establishment of formal schools, the Christian chapels and churches, and the local government units/state agencies that gradually usurped the functions and authority of the indigenous socio-politico-religious institutions of the Kankanaey villages.

The discussion below – written from my experience and perspective as a cultural participant in Kankanaey realities – will be in sync with the bigger corpus of data on Cordillera socio-cultural transformations at that time, but focused on the locals' experience of the Church's impact on their indigenous communities and culture, particularly their worldview and religious practice.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ken S. Coates, *A Global History of Indigenous Peoples: Struggle and Survival* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> The Cordillera region comprises the provinces of Benguet, Mountain Province, Abra, Ifugao, Kalinga and Apayao. The ethnic groups in these provinces include the Kankanaey, Ibaloy, Bontok, Kalinga, Tuwali, Ayangan, Kalanguya, Itneg, Isneg, and several other smaller sub-sets.

<sup>18</sup> For works on this period, see Albert Depre, CICM, *From a Tiny Shoot: The History of CICM Philippine Province* (Quezon City: CICM Missionaries, n.d.); and, Kenton Clymer, "Episcopalian Missionaries and Mountain Peoples in the Philippines, 1903-1941: A Question of Influence," *Pilipinas 2* (1993).

<sup>19</sup> The original Kankanaey culture area more or less covers Kibungan, Bakun and Mankayan in the northwestern part of Benguet Province, and Bauko, Tadian, Sabangan, Sagada and Besao in the southeastern region of Mountain Province). This area also extends to some adjoining municipalities of Ilocos Sur.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 4 of Gaston P. Kibiten, *The Politics of Clan Reunions: Kinship, Ritual, and Cultural Transformation* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2016).

#### A. Gradual eclipse of the indigenous socio-politico-religious centers and the beginnings of cultural alienation

In the traditional Kankanaey villages, the center of socio-politico-religious activities were the ceremonial yards called *at-ato* (*dap-ay* in other villages). Situated in each of the village's wards, these yards were the venue for community celebrations like the *begnas* (pre-harvest celebration). It is also where the male elders gathered for deliberations on ward or village issues. However, by the 1970s, it was clear that these traditional institutions were already in decline as a result of the Christian missionaries' and colonial government's interventions.<sup>21</sup> Already, there were families in the villages who considered themselves devout Christians that they did not take part anymore in the activities in the *at-ato*. Ours was one of them. Instead of the *at-ato*, the locus of our religious observance was the village chapel. That was where we gathered for weekly Sunday liturgies, and the occasional celebrations like baptisms, weddings, and mortuary rites. And to make sure that we did not slide back, the priest, lay leaders, and catechists regularly admonished us not to join the 'pagan' rituals and performances, either in the *at-ato* or the *patpatayan* (ceremonial yards with sacred trees) for community rituals or in private residences for domestic rituals.

Given my family affinity with the Church (my father served as a catechist and a teacher at the mission school), I developed some form of aversion towards anything connected with the *at-ato*, the male elders, and the rites and prayers conducted there. I was made to understand that these were pagan and *inuugma* ('ways of the past'), so I looked down on these and consciously dissociated myself from them. I wanted to be different, to be Christian, to be formally educated, and to seek a life beyond the traditional village and all that it represented. I even wanted to become a missionary like the Belgian and Dutch priests who ministered to our community then, so I can also help spread Christianity in other parts of the world that still clung to their 'ways of the past.'

Notwithstanding these, I still found myself discreetly attending some of the observances in the *at-ato* like the *begnas*. These were festive after all, with much dancing and playing of gongs. In hindsight, I was already navigating two worlds and identities back then. I went for the new religious culture, but I was also caught in the old. It was not an easy feat, as things were not really a matter of black and white.

#### B. Struggling with a new worldview and a different ethos

In the church, the expectations for being a good Christian meant professing faith in the Trinity. This also meant adhering to the Catholic Church doctrines on resurrection, heaven, hell and purgatory, among others. These articles of faith were ritually repeated each Sunday liturgy in the recitation of The Apostles Creed. Christian morality was focused on the avoidance of sin particularly the injunctions of the Biblical Ten Commandments. Religious practice and piety centered on the performance of 'Christian obligations,' referring to prescribed religious observances like attending the Sunday masses/liturgies, receiving Holy Communion, and going to confession. All these were totally alien – beliefs, practices, and moral standards having no roots in the traditional culture.

Accepting one's obligation as a Christian had a twin requisite – turning away from the traditional worldview and religion. It meant disavowing belief in the deities and unseen

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

spirits, and regarding them as superstitious and pagan. It meant putting a stop to one's relationship with these, and desisting from the traditional ethical expectations of acting reverentially towards them, like inviting them to join in a drinking session, feast, or ritual. And the proscription also applied to deceased relatives and ancestors. All these were part of the socio-moral world of the natives, but had to be rethought and redrawn as one turned to become a Christian.

On my part, given my family's strong attachment with the Church, I learned most of the Christian prayers and strived to join in all the activities in the village chapel. I accepted the saints, angels and demons, courtesy of the Sunday liturgies that regularly instilled these in me. Conversely, I tried to banish thoughts and relations with the traditional unseen spirits. I was partially successful but not thoroughly because these were alive in the culture of the community, and there was no way that one would not have been reminded about them. But back then, I heard from elders that the intensity of exchange with the spirits has already decreased considerably, unlike the period before World War II.

#### C. Imbibing foreign religious settings and narratives over and above the indigenous

I have vivid memories of Sunday liturgies in the village chapel, where biblical passages from the Old and the New Testament were a staple. The gospel readings were special, as they recounted Jesus' life, teachings, and actions. The first readings were from the Old Testament, and they related stories about the Jewish ancestors and their dealings with their neighboring peoples like the Egyptians. The second readings were generally on the letters of the apostles to various individuals or groups like the Corinthians and Thessalonians. Understandably, the places, geography, peoples, and events talked about in the biblical narratives were all foreign – the locus being Jesus' and his ancestors' homeland and socio-cultural context. These had nothing to do with the Cordilleras or even the Philippines. But at that time I did not find that to be problematic at all. These details were from the Bible after all, which was the word of God, as often proclaimed during the liturgies themselves.

In contrast, the traditional Kankanaey rituals were performed in familiar places within the domain of the village and its surrounding region. They involved familiar deities (primarily Lumawig, the Kankanaey culture hero sometimes equated with Jesus Christ in recent discourse by the locals), spirits (including those of deceased ancestors and relatives), and familiar geographies (e.g., Mount Kalaw-witan). These were also conducted for reasons interwoven with the familiar, daily concerns of people (healing for individuals, blessings for family or community, contra-agricultural pestilence, etc.). Thus, the rituals formally connected the people to their deities and spirits, and likewise to their natural environment; and vice versa, these summoned the deities and spirits to take part in the people's daily concerns and aspirations. The rituals also reaffirmed the spiritual meanings ascribed to the environment, being the abode of spirits. These were not just mountains, rivers, rocks, and grounds.

But then, again, by that time, the performance of the traditional rituals were noticeably getting less by the decade, as more families were going instead to the Christian churches and chapels for their religious activities. As the traditional rituals declined, so too did the beliefs and practices that they embodied and reaffirmed.

#### D. Believing in an otherworldly destination and a world in passing

The Church propagated an idea of salvation that was mainly about going to heaven after death. Heaven, in my imagination then, was a destination up in the sky with everyone dressed up in white, with halos and wings like the angels, and seeing God face to face. It is the beatific vision in Christian theology. This religious worldview was captured by a short ditty that young Christian children sang, most likely taught early on by the missionaries:<sup>22</sup>

*Ub-ubbing kami* (Children we are)  
*Langit papanan mi* (Heaven is our destination)  
*Nu kayat yo ti mapan* (If you want to join us)  
*Suruten yo ti dalan* (Follow the way)

I have often heard in liturgical homilies that this world was where we are meant to demonstrate our faith and live our lives as Christians. But our stay on earth is temporary. After the earthly test, when we die, we are bound to our lasting destination. The faithful who made the test reach heaven, which is a place of incomparable bliss. For those who do not make it, their destiny is hell, which is the exact opposite of heaven – eternal punishment, suffering, unquenchable thirst, desolation.

As a young lad, I imagined hell as real scary. And somehow it helped me become more pious in my religious observances and in avoiding occasions of sin. However, the thought of heaven was not of much help. I just was not able to fathom well what it was seeing God in all his glory.

In contrast, the indigenous concept of the afterlife was more tangible. It is said that when we die, we joined our deceased relatives and ancestors. And that was presumed to be good, especially as one gets reunited with kin who are after all the closest to one in terms of social relations. As to what happened or what the dead do afterwards, not much was elaborated. What was clear was that we do not leave the worldly realm after death. That is why the spirits of the dead relatives and ancestors are readily called upon to take part in feasts and rituals, like the other unseen spirits within the vicinity of the village.

For whatever reasons, the Christian idea of heaven was not as appealing despite my avowed allegiance to Christianity. I clung to the idea, but perhaps only cerebrally. While growing up and all through the years, I still hoped deep within that reuniting with ancestors and relatives – and within this world – would be the better resolution at the time of one's death.

#### E. Losing touch with the natural environment

I can safely say that during my growing up years, I have not heard of concerns raised about care for the environment coming from the churches, both Catholic and Protestant. Yet it was not that nobody cared about the environment then. The community did. But this was something inherent in the traditional culture, not from the teachings and prescribed ethical practice by the Christian churches.

The traditional Kankanaey worldview dictated that there are other sentient and conscious beings around. These are the unseen spirits that dwelt in specific places like bodies

---

<sup>22</sup> This is in Ilocano, the language of the neighboring lowland ethnic group, which was introduced during the American period and developed as the lingua franca of the Cordillera region.

of water, bluffs, cliffs, mountains and even objects like boulders and trees. And we were taught by the elders to be circumspect when approaching these places and objects, and informing the spirit-dwellers as one passed by, just like one does when stepping into a house yard not his own. We were especially admonished to be reverential towards water springs, which had spirits guarding them. In fact, sometimes, the spring waters were also personified as spirits on their own. There were taboos followed when within the vicinity of the springs, like not being very boisterous lest we disturbed the spirits. Ditto with leaving garbage in the vicinity, using commercial soaps and shampoos, and fouling the spring waters. Violations of these injunctions either caused maladies to the perpetrator or, worse, led to the decrease of water volume or even drying up of the springs. Aside from these prohibitions, ritual offerings were occasionally made to acknowledge and express gratitude towards the spring spirits. Should the spring water feel it is neglected, it can move away to join other springs and would need to be propitiated for it to return.

Overall, people had a mutual and respectful regard for other things around them. Farmers casually addressed their rice fields and gardens, gently coaching the plants to grow robust and productive. They talked to their rice fields, expressing their wish that these do not get barren or give way to erosion; to the water to be sufficient and make the plants grow; and to the water spring so that this will not dry up. When cutting down trees, people addressed the tree and gently asked permission to cut this, as they explained their need for doing so. Upon cutting down the tree, they covered the stump with leaves and soil, just like a poultice is applied to a wounded person. Given my Christian leaning, I do not recall having addressed any tree while I cut it down. However, at least I remember having applied dirt to the tree stumps. I ‘wounded’ them after all.

Thus, my environmental ethos has been shaped by the indigenous worldview rather than that of Christianity. In the church, what I heard and got familiar with pertaining to the natural world were the Genesis creation texts giving instructions that humans subdue the earth and have dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 1: 26-28). In hindsight, the silence over caring for nature was in sync with the Church’s theology back then: As Christians, we should be more concerned about the world to come, i.e., making it to heaven at the time of our death.

It was only in 1988 when the CBCP’s pastoral letter on ecology was read in one Sunday liturgy that I heard of the Catholic Church’s expression of concern for environmental issues.<sup>23</sup> It came as a refreshing news back then. What I thought and felt earlier as a very important facet of my life and being – i.e., my relation with the natural world – was finally spoken of in church. Thus, part of my personal ethos was affirmed and in a way brought within the ambit of my Christian faith and practice.

## **II. Critical reflection and future directions**

The entry of Christianity into the indigenous communities of the Cordilleras has, inarguably, set the tone for the degradation of the locals’ traditional socio-moral world, including the way they viewed and related with their natural environment. Abetted by the American colonizer’s military force and superior technology, and impelled ideologically by the pre-Vatican II worldview and the Western notion of development that hardly saw anything admirable in the

---

<sup>23</sup> Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land: A Pastoral Letter on Ecology* (Manila: CBCP, 1988).

native cultures, the Christian missionaries went about converting the natives through several mechanisms.

First, they unapologetically denigrated the indigenous belief systems and practices as pagan, backward, and superstitious. In place of these, they introduced Christianity's foreign, Biblically-based articles of faith, narratives and myths that they believed shall deliver the natives from paganism and superstition. Second, they curtailed the performance of traditional rituals, thus impairing the mechanisms for the reproduction of native culture. Of old, the native rituals repetitively reaffirmed the local worldview (what the world was and the people's place in it) and its corresponding ethos (how the people ought to live their lives in that world). Third, the missionaries' introduction and regular performance of new church rituals had the opposite effect as the traditional rituals: They made the natives internalize the new articles of faith and moral code, gradually directing them towards a different worldview and ethos. Fourth, Christianity's teachings on salvation and end-of-time – at least in the way they were presented and understood then – stressed on an out-of-this world destination for humanity. This provided a new ideology towards a dualistic, spiritual-natural divide that the natives did not have earlier, and that would prove detrimental to their environmental ethos.

Over the span of about 50 years, the indigenous communities slowly succumbed to the influence of Christianity and turned their back from most of their traditional beliefs and practices. This resulted in the erosion of the local worldview and religion, including their reverential relations with nature. Consequently, the recent generations of Kankanaeys have grown up alienated from their 'ways of the past' or have lost confidence and pride in these. But it is not just the indigenous population who suffer the adverse effects. The Church itself also bears the burden, as Christianity has largely remained a formal, externally-sourced, and surface-level religion whose articles of faith, morals, and practices barely touch base with the indigenous culture's belief systems, symbols, rituals and natural settings.

In perspective, this localized experience of the Kankanaeys (and most likely among other ethnic groups in the Cordilleras) is certainly part of what St. John Paul II has recognized and apologized for – the 'pain and suffering' caused by the Church's presence among indigenous populations.<sup>24</sup> So, too, with what Pope Francis claimed as the 'grave sins' done to indigenous peoples 'in the name of God' for which he also asked forgiveness.<sup>25</sup> The pain and suffering would not just have included physical violence and material destruction but also the equally damaging and irreversible impact on social structures and cultures that Francis' *Laudato Si* laments poignantly about.<sup>26</sup>

Coming to terms with this somber past is not an easy task, both for the Church and the indigenous Christians. But in perspective, these processes happened prior to Vatican II when the worldview underpinning the Church's missionary work was that of Christendom, which saw the Church as the only dispenser of truth and salvation.<sup>27</sup> With Vatican II already putting

---

<sup>24</sup> St. John Paul II made the apology to the indigenous populations of the Americas during his 1992 visit to the Dominican Republic.

<sup>25</sup> The apology was issued during the second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Santa Cruz, Bolivia on July 9, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, par. 145.

<sup>27</sup> Leonardo Mercado, *Dialogue and Faith: A Philippine View* (Manila: Logos Publication, Inc., 2009): 194-195.

that perspective behind,<sup>28</sup> and recently with Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>29</sup> setting even more inclusive views on evangelization and inculturation, the Church has already come a long way. It is in consideration of this auspicious time that I pose several lines of actions for the Church and the indigenous Christian communities to reflect and act on.

A. A Church-wide formal apology and rectification of wrongs against the indigenous peoples

There were two instances when the Church made an apology to the indigenous peoples in the country. The first was in 1997 when Bishop Fernando Capalla, the then Chair of the Episcopal Commission on Interreligious Dialogue, apologized in person to the participants during an actual dialogue with indigenous peoples in Mindanao.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, this detail is hardly known outside the dialogue group itself.

The second apology happened more than a decade later when the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples' 28<sup>th</sup> general assembly, picking after the example of Pope John Paul II in his Day of Pardon homily in 2000, came up with a formal statement calling for the Church 'to a humble examination of conscience and towards a healing of historical wounds by asking pardon for sins committed against the indigenous peoples'. This included asking for forgiveness 'for suppressing their spirit as a people... [and having] injured their personhood as they took on a new identity as Catholics,' 'entered indigenous communities from a position of power, indifferent to their struggles and pains,' and 'taught Christianity as a religion robed with colonial cultural superiority'. The statement was indeed fresh and unprecedented. However, this has not made wide and profound impression on the Church at large, beyond the circle of Church people involved in Indigenous People's Apostolate. For one, the statement was produced by the Church's commission in charge of indigenous peoples. It was not from the Catholic Bishops Conference general assembly itself, which is the highest body of the Church in the country.

For a widespread impact on the Church and the Christianized indigenous communities, the CBCP assembly may do well to come up with a nationwide statement, to be read out widely in all parishes across the country like its pastoral letter on ecology that I heard read as a teenager in 1988. This can be done in a special liturgy of reconciliation like the one presided over by Pope John Paul II during the Day of Pardon in 2000. Moreover, the Church statement should go beyond asking for forgiveness and reconciliation. To help in the rectification of 'historical wrongs,' it must also include an unambiguous statement recognizing that the indigenous peoples' religions and worldviews that the Church tried to banish are not pagan, evil, and superstitious.

These pronouncement and action by the Church will go a long way in bringing healing and closure to the indigenous peoples' experience of alienation from their own tradition. This should help bring about a psychic cleansing – a vindication that their ancestors had an authentic culture that was valuable and unique in its own way just like any other culture. Their forebears' worldview and religion may have been different but they were not of the devil, superstitious, or ignorant. They were attacked and suppressed by Christianity

---

<sup>28</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - Lumen Gentium* (Vatican: the Holy See. Rome, 21 Nov. 1965), no. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Ottawa: CCCB Publications, 2013; reprint, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Mercado, *Meeting the Spirituality of Indigenous Peoples*, 15-16.

simply because they were labeled as 'pagan'. This is not to say that these cultures had no share of their own internal contradictions and criticisms; we would assume there were, just like in all cultures including those deeply influenced by Christianity.

With this admission and affirmation by the Church, the Christianized indigenous communities can finally come to terms and make peace with their own past that they have turned their backs from, in varying degrees, due to the charge of Christianity. They can reclaim their link to their tradition, now with pride and dignity. As for those Christians who, again, in varying degrees, still subscribe to practices and beliefs of their traditional religion and culture, they may now achieve a form of integration or wholeness, rather than live in guilt, shame, or uncertainty – the split-level syndrome. Having been Christianized already, these indigenous Christian communities have no way of returning to a pristine, traditional religion and worldview anymore. But at least the possibility of bridging the things that still remain from their traditional worldview and religion will now be open. They can then revalue, even retrieve and develop elements of those traditions. And this includes a possible revival of their religious beliefs and practices, either within the ambit of the Church or not anymore. That is their right to self-determination in spiritual matters, namely, 'to practice, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies,'<sup>31</sup> which the Church will hopefully respect from then on.

#### B. Radical inculturation

In the 1970s-1980s, right after Vatican II, there were already initiatives done for inculturation by the Church in the Cordilleras. Traditional fabrics were used as adornment in chapels and churches especially during especial occasions like weddings. There were also liturgical songs in the various Cordillera languages. In really big occasions like priestly ordinations, the traditional dance and gong playing were also done. However, these were limited to the aesthetic, artistic and linguistic dimensions. Not much was done on a deeper level like using native symbols, myths, prayers, and rituals themselves.<sup>32</sup> But this was understandable given the strong and lingering effect of the stigmatization of things connected with traditional religion.

It was only much later that there were attempts to come up with inculturated rituals by adopting and integrating elements of traditional Kankanaey rituals, myths and prayers into the Christian rites, like baptism, mortuary, and wedding. However, these were rather sporadic and individual-clergy initiated rather than a systematic and concerted effort by the whole Church.<sup>33</sup>

This radical, beyond-the-surface type of inculturation should be encouraged and made systematic, to be carried out as a regular program at the level of local churches. In fact, this should be taken up as a special priority by the Church in Christianized indigenous communities and dioceses like those in the Cordillera region. For one, the traditional myths,

---

<sup>31</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Honoring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Volume 1: Summary (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Limited, Publishers, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Closest to this is the adoption of *lundang* (Kankanaey thanksgiving feast) in the Eucharistic celebration. But this was also limited to the offering of farm produce during the mass and the sharing of a common meal afterwards.

<sup>33</sup> Along this line, it is worth mentioning the efforts of the late Fr. Manuel Samonte and some colleagues from the Diocese of Bontoc-Lagawe.

rituals, and symbols are still not totally lost among these communities. For another, the recent developments in the Church mainstream view on inculturation make this imperative even more emphatic. This is exemplified in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* that demonstrates remarkable openness in terms not only of recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of cultures but likewise actively ushering and accepting these cultures into the Church: 'Through inculturation, the Church introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community'.<sup>34</sup> This is certainly coming into full circles for indigenous populations. Whereas before, they were made to cast off their 'pagan' cultures and religions at the portals of the Church, now the Church encourages and embraces them with their cultures.

The inculturation of Christianity using the myths, narratives and prayers – including the natural geographies as is typical of traditional rituals – shall once and for all root Christianity into the local cultures and natural settings of the Cordillera region. And by then, it will be a Christianity that the Cordillera ethnic groups can recognize and claim as their own brand of Christianity, though still under banner of the Church.

### C. Integrating the indigenous spirits and deities into the Christian worldview and practice

Lowland Filipino Christians, despite having been Christianized for so long dating back to Spanish time, have not totally given up their belief and practices associated with indigenous spirits. And while there may be degrees as regards the intensity of belief and the practices done in relation to these spirits, the fact is, this is still noted across the social spectrum, from rural folks to educated urbanites.<sup>35</sup> Given this, the Church should rethink its options on the matter. Its continued attempt to castigate and eradicate these spirits, or its silence and denial of them, will never solve the problem. These will only perpetuate split-level Christianity or folk Catholicism as mentioned. And the Church will miss on the opportunity to develop, together with the indigenous communities, a localized theology and practice that will creatively engage and integrate the local worldviews and religions – hence running the risk of being a 'surface level' religion forever, following Bulatao's notion of the two-tiered split-level Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Studies have shown that Filipino Christians, both among lowland ethnic communities and upland indigenous groups,<sup>37</sup> have integrated the indigenous spirits and deities in their belief system, that is, among the rank of saints in the Catholic belief system.<sup>38</sup> They profess faith in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, yet they also believe and relate with the indigenous spirits. And thus far there are no reports that these Christians consider this as problematic or dysfunctional. It is probably the purist cleric or theologian who makes such a label or distinction, but not the Christians themselves who live this fact. If this were so, then the Church should now formally drop down its guard and give its blessings to this situation. What is important is that these indigenous spirits and deities are integrated in the people's faith and practice as faithful Christians.

---

<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 116.

<sup>35</sup> Mercado, *Dialogue and Faith*, 164.

<sup>36</sup> Jaime Bulatao, SJ, "A Social-Psychological View of the Philippine Church," *Contemporary Studies* 2 (1965).

<sup>37</sup> For lowland groups, see Andrew G. Recepcion, "The Filipino Transpersonal Worldview," *Asian Christian Review* 1, no. 3 (2007): 67-75. For upland groups, see Florencio D. Millare, "The Tinguians and Their Old Form of Worship," *Philippine Studies* 3, no. 4 (1965): 403-414.

<sup>38</sup> Charles J-H MacDonald, "Folk Catholicism and Pre-Hispanic Religions in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies* 52, no. 1 (2004): 78-93.

On a personal note, when I myself came of age and realized the full nature of Christian faith on my own – and likewise had a more nuanced understanding of our traditional culture and religion – I soon thought to myself that believing in the spirits and cultivating relations with them should not be a problem after all. Early on, I was much influenced by the Church leaders who equated these spirits with the Biblical demons and the devil. But as far as the indigenous perspective is concerned, most of these spirits – just like humans – are peaceful when not harmed, and benevolent when related well with. This is all the more true with deceased ancestors and relatives. And so as an adult, I began cultivating again my relations with the spirits. And this did not make me feel less a Christian. In fact, at this point in time, the spirits of local provenance (including deceased kin) are more significant and personal to me rather than the demons and angels of the Bible. After all, I am well aware by now that these Biblical supernatural beings were also integrated from the Judaeo-Hellenistic cultures at the beginning of Christianity.

Which now makes me convinced that the integration of local spirits (among other things) into the local Christian community's worldview and practice is one key component to the development of a localized, inculturated Christianity. If there is Roman Catholicism, then a Filipino or Kankanaey Catholicism is not far-fetched. Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* says as much: 'Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression... it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root'.<sup>39</sup> The inclusion of local spirits in Kankanaey or Filipino Christianity will distinguish it from, say, Chinese or Indian Christianity with their equally localized configurations of religious worldview and practice.

Admittedly, things will not be that easy. It is expected that there will be questions and dilemmas along the way. But what is crucial is that, with the recognition and acceptance of the local spirits and deities, the Church and the indigenous Christians can then proceed to a creative development along this area – both in theology and in practice. The Church will still have to attend to doctrinal issues in careful – if contested – discernment, just like in its early years when Christianity encountered other cultures as it moved beyond the confines of the Jewish culture. And the indigenous Christians will still have to struggle to live their faith authentically within their own cultural contexts, which also equally have their own challenges and contradictions.

#### D. Towards an indigenous-Christian ecological worldview and ethos

From a pastoral perspective, the Church may have to consciously tone down on its recourse and use of the Genesis creation texts that instruct humans to subdue the earth and have dominion over the rest of creation. These provide religious ideology for an anti-ecological orientation that will not bode well for Christian-indigenous groups who still somehow retain measures of reverential regard for nature. If these Biblical texts cannot be side-stepped, they should at least be consciously qualified in order to blunt their anti-ecological slant. One other way is to use and focus instead on other Biblical texts that stress on care for creation as exemplified by the CBCP's pastoral letter on ecology.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Ottawa: CCCB Publications, 2013; reprint, 2014), 87.

<sup>40</sup> Biblical texts used in the pastoral letter include Gen. 1:1-2, 4; Gen. 1:27-28; Gen. 2:19-20; Gen. 9:12; Eph. 1:9-10; and, Col. 1:16-17.

Likewise, the Church may do well to widely catechize its members with the theology of nature from *Laudato Si* in order to temper the early missionaries' pre-Vatican II emphasis on an otherworldly salvation for humanity that put little value to environmental care. The encyclical's theology of the natural world has three points, namely – that other creatures have value in themselves, that they reveal their Creator, and that they form with us a sublime communion in God.<sup>41</sup> For Christianized indigenous groups, these new ideas will be a most welcome development as they will reaffirm and reinforce their traditional reverential regard for nature. In fact, this is one area where Christian theology will be able to enrich traditional ecological wisdom. While the indigenous worldviews generally put especial attention to specific sacred groves and trees, boulders, caves and pools – these being the abode of spirits – *Laudato Si*'s theology of nature, channeling St. Francis' original formulations, calls attention to God's presence in all creation.<sup>42</sup> Henceforth, it is the whole of nature, from the lowliest to the grandest, that is imbued with the divine.

*Laudato Si* thus offers itself as a common ground by which the Church and the Christianized indigenous communities can start from to shape a localized Christian-indigenous worldview and ethos that creatively integrates the latest wisdom offered by the Church and the traditional wisdom of indigenous cultures.

### **Conclusion**

History can no longer be re-written, and the experience of Christianization by the indigenous peoples will forever mark their history and identity. But while the past cannot be undone, a better future can be forged by both the Christianized indigenous peoples and the Church. If the relations between the two started on the basis of asymmetry and imposition, their continued partnership should henceforth be hinged on mutuality and dialogue. For now, the challenge for the indigenous communities is to be more assertive, coming off from their past experience of enforced passivity. For the Church, the current times call for more listening to the indigenous peoples' voice and encouragement of their active contribution.

It is on this note that the lines of actions are offered for consideration by both parties, namely, a Church-wide formal apology and rectification of wrongs, radical inculturation, integration of indigenous deities and spirits, and shaping an indigenous-Christian ecological worldview and ethos. The Church bears much of the burden for the first recommendation, as it should be fully accountable for its past actions. For the following three suggestions, both the Church and the indigenous peoples should share equal responsibility. Through these measures, the Church will hopefully get to be a more credible collaborator to the indigenous peoples as it owns up to its historical sins and strives to get rooted and inculturated into the indigenous communities. On the side of the Christianized indigenous peoples, the interventions could pave the way for them to come to terms with their disrupted history and delegitimized tradition. They can then revalue, reclaim and develop elements of their traditional worldview and religion, including ecological ethos, as an important resource in today's struggle towards caring for the earth.

It is not expected that things will go easy, considering on the one hand, the historical prejudice of the Church against indigenous cultures, and on the other hand, the indigenous peoples' 'pain and suffering' under the dark shadow of Christian proselytization. But we trust

---

<sup>41</sup> Denis Edwards, "Earth as God's Creation: The Theology of the Natural World in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*," *Phronema* 31, no. 2 (2016):1-16.

<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, par. 233.

that the Church and the Christianized indigenous communities have already come a long way and are prepared to discuss the challenges brought forth, especially given today's ecological crisis that seriously threatens our common home.