

# Unless a Seed Falls and Dies...

Commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith

Published by the  
Faith and Order Commission  
United Church of Christ in the Philippines  
1667 Dr. A. Vasquez St., Malate  
Manila, Philippines  
2010

**Cover Design** : **Vicente Feliciano, Jr.**  
**Layout** : **Sancho P. Opina, Jr.**

**Unless a Seed Falls and Dies...**  
**Commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Faith and Order Commission  
United Church of Christ in the Philippines

# **Table of Contents**

## **The UCCP Statement of Faith**

### **Preface**

### **Unless a Seed Falls and Dies: An Exposition**

### **Unless a Seed Falls and Dies: The Evolution**

### **What the Writers Say**

## **PART ONE**

### **The Significance of Creeds in the History of the Church**

Mariano C. Apilado

### **Why A Statement of Faith?**

Levi V. Oracion

## **PART TWO**

### **The Doctrine of the Triune God**

Everett L. Mendoza

#### **We Believe in God the Creator**

Lope B. Robin

#### **God Became Human: Understanding the Christ in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Luna I. Dingayan

#### **The Holy Spirit: The Presence of God in the World**

Ruth Panganiban-Billena

### **Jesus Christ: God's Majestic Work of Judgment and Grace**

Levi V. Oracion

### **Affirming Mary's Place in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Muriel Orevillo Montenegro

### **An Introduction to the Doctrine of Salvation in the UCCP**

Everett L. Mendoza

### **Looking At the Mirror: Do We Radiate God's Image?**

Muriel Orevillo Montenegro

### **"Like A Two-Edged Sword": The Bible in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Noriel C. Capulong

### **The Church: The Household of God**

Erme C. Camba

### **The Kingdom of God: Its Centrality in the Scripture**

Reuel Norman O. Marigza

### **The Inclusivity of the Kingdom of God: An Entry to the Commentary on the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Hope S. Antone

### **The Resurrection**

Levi V. Oracion

### **The Second Coming of Jesus Christ**

Levi V. Oracion

### **About the Writers**

## Preface

Theological articulations and affirmation arise from a definite historical context and never in a vacuum. The early Christian creed, “Jesus is Lord,” was not only a foundational doctrinal affirmation but was a statement directly opposed to the claim that Caesar is lord.

In light of issues and concerns that have emerged in recent years, there has been widespread clamor for theological articulation on the various dimensions of our faith, particularly as affirmed in the UCCP Statement of Faith.

It is therefore with a sense of relief and jubilation that we now present to you Unless a Seed Falls and Dies, a new set of commentaries on the 1992 version of the UCCP Statement of Faith. This serves as a sequel to Like a Mustard Seed, which was published in 1986, although it actually contained articles on the earlier and longer version of the Statement of Faith.

I commend the members of the Faith and Order Commission of 2002-2006 and 2006-2010 for their persistence and perseverance in putting together this book in this final form. I am grateful to Bishop Erme R. Camba who chaired the FOC in both periods, and the members who also wrote individual commentaries - Dr. Noriel Capulong, Dr. Everett Mendoza, and Rev. Reuel Marigza. I also want to thank the other writers - Dr. Hope Antone, Dr. Mariano Apilado, Dr. Ruth Billena, Rev. Luna Dingayan, Dr. Levi Oracion, Dr. Muriel Oreillo-Montenegro and Rev. Lope Robin. Even before the publication of this book, these FOC members and writers have served as resource persons on theological concerns in many UCCP meetings and other ecumenical gatherings. I commend as well Ms. Edna J. Orteza who accompanied the whole process.

It is my prayer that through the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the reading of these commentaries will help foster unity and understanding among the constituency, deepen our theological foundation, and further strengthen our commitment to mission and to the various ministries of the church.

**Bishop Reuel Norman O. Marigza**  
General Secretary

## THE UCCP STATEMENT OF FAITH

**WE BELIEVE**, *in One God; Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer who provides order, purpose, meaning and fulfillment to all creation. That in Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary, God became human and is Sovereign Lord of life and history. That in the Holy Spirit, God is present in the world, empowering and guiding believers to understand and live out their faith in Jesus Christ.*

**WE BELIEVE**, *persons are created in the image of God and destined to live in community with God, with other persons and with all creation. That by disobedience, they have become sinful, but, by grace through faith, they are redeemed in Jesus Christ. That being entrusted with God's creation, they are called to participate in the establishment of a just and compassionate social order.*

**WE BELIEVE**, *that the Church is the one Body of Christ, the whole community of persons reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and entrusted with God's ministry.*

**WE BELIEVE**, *that the Holy Bible is a faithful and inspired witness of God's self revelation in Jesus Christ and in history, to illumine, guide correct and edify believers in their faith and witness.*

**WE BELIEVE**, *that God is at work to make each person a new being in Christ and the whole world God's Kingdom in which love, justice and peace prevail. That the Kingdom of God is present where faith in Jesus Christ is shared, where healing is given to the sick, where food is given to the hungry, where light is given to the blind, and where liberty is given to the captive and oppressed.*

**WE BELIEVE**, *that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has overcome the power of death gives assurance of life after death, and we look forward to His coming again in all fullness and glory make all creation new and to gather all the faithful in the Kingdom of God. Amen.*

Revised by the Faith and Order Committee in 1992  
Approved by the General Assembly of 2006

## Unless a Seed Falls and Dies...

### An Exposition

*“Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (or bears much fruit).” John 12:24*

In Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, the scattered seeds represent the gospel that falls on the ears of different kinds of hearers. The emphasis is on the hearers of the gospel. On the other hand, the text from John 12 is about Jesus’ imminent death. The whole speech pertaining to his death was enigmatic and distressful to his followers. Someone from the crowd called out Jesus that “the Christ will remain forever.” Behind the dialogue between Jesus and the crowd was the question that proved to be the defining truth of the gospel which, at that point in history, was still struggling to break through the integument of the Jewish womb. To a pious Jew, a dead Jesus couldn’t be the messiah; to a Gentile proselyte a savior couldn’t die. But both to the Jewish and the Gentile the message is the same: Christ died and is risen!” By his death, Jesus conquered death so that many may have eternal life with God.

Since the gospel that the church proclaims is none other than Jesus Christ himself, it may be likened to the fate and destiny of the messiah by whose death many have received eternal life. Across time, the one story of Jesus became the four Gospels, the Letters of Paul and other books that together constitute the New Testament - all 27 of them. There is not one story of Jesus any more but many stories, but every time a story of Jesus is told those who listened and believed found life and reason to live in the midst of great suffering. The Gospel of Mark was a word of life to Jewish Christians who shared the fear and anguish of the Jewish nation that was threatened with annihilation by Roman imperial forces. John gave comfort to a new generation of Gentile Christians who saw the passing of older generations without having witnessed Christ’s return in glory. For Paul, the gospel was the power of salvation to conquer the enslaving powers of sin and death. In their different versions of the story of Jesus, many had found life and hope.

But that was not the end of the dying of one seed and the rising of many seeds. The gospel continues to bear much fruit in the doctrines and teachings of the church. Not all the seeds, however, have found their rightful places in the greater estate of the church. Some were found to be bad seeds and there thrown away or burned. There is little doubt, though, that there were good seeds that the church had left for destruction as well as bad seeds that managed to be sifted together with the good ones. And yet, it was by putting in several vessels a rich diversity of teachings that the church has been able to keep its unity, sameness and continuity through the flux and vicissitudes of time.

The commentaries prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the UCCP are the many seeds that sprung from one seed - the gospel of Jesus Christ. They represent the diverse views and sentiments within the Church as articulated by the different writer-theologians. There is, however, a discernable coherence and consistence in the book as a whole that may be said to be indicative of the level of spiritual and theological unity that the UCCP has achieved.

It may be disappointing to some members to miss the reading and interpretations of the gospel by previous generations of theologians within and outside the UCCP. It may also be distressful to some that the book fails to represent the whole spectrum of current theological positions - from the fundamentalist-conservative to the liberal-progressive. However, that was not the purpose for the FOC for which the book of commentaries was composed. Its objective was to make a theological articulation of the faith underlying the concrete life and work of the UCCP since its inception in 1948. It is an **interpretative account** of the faith of the Church as it is manifested in its various programs.

The book has also a didactic purpose - to enable members to achieve a unity of faith and work, of theory and practice. The two are mutually enhancing and enriching. Otherwise, it is a schizophrenic sort existence to have an understanding of the faith that does not correspond with the concrete life and work of the church. In addition, the didactic task of interpretation and articulation also involves making a critique of the church’s current life and work. It is the prophetic task of the Faith and Order Commission to inform the church when it fails to carry out the mandate of the gospel. The truth and power of the gospel may be diminished, distorted or perverted in its actual practice.

“Unless the seed falls to the ground and dies...” There is a tinge of nostalgia for the first seed that is now gone. This is an element of the church’s faithful and loving remembering to the Lord. But from the decay of the old seed has sprung a tree that has borne much fruit and plenty of seeds. This makes our remembering a source of joy, challenge and hope. The book of commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith is a great harvest from the gospel that all the faithful should rejoice and thank God for.

**For the Faith and Order Commission**

**Everett L. Mendoza, D. Theol.**

## **Unless a Seed Falls and Dies: An Introduction**

This book of commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith took a long and tedious process indeed.

Before the General Assembly of 2002, there were two versions of the Statement of Faith in circulation: a longer version and another as revised by the Faith and Order Commission in 1992. This caused confusion among among the local churches. A call was then sent out to the conferences, inviting them to participate in a process of study and possible amendment to the 1992 version as proposed. However, except for Davao City Church and Rev. Vicente Espinosa, there was no response that came from the conferences up to the time of the 2002 General Assembly. Thus, it was presumed that what may be needed by the churches was not a new version but more of a process that will guide them towards a deeper and a more dynamic understanding of the Statement of Faith.

It was at the General Assembly in Baguio in 2002 when the 1992 revised version of the UCCP Statement of Faith by the Faith and Order Commission was approved for the general use of the church constituency. The General Assembly also approved a proposal for the Faith and Order Commission to come up with study materials on this present version of the Statement of Faith which will supplement, as well as update the first commentary of the Statement of Faith, **Like a Mustard Seed**, which came out in 1987. An updated commentary became of more critical importance when it was realized that the commentaries were on the much earlier version of the UCCP Statement of Faith.

Subsequently, through a series of meetings and consultations, the Faith and Order Commission started the process of producing a new set of commentaries intended to help the church constituencies develop a deeper understanding of the theological foundations and the practical, ethical and missiological implications of each of the articles of the revised version of the Statement of Faith.

Thus, the commentaries for each of the six articles of the Statement of Faith were farmed out and assigned to various members and consultants of the Faith and Order Commission. Some other writers in various fields of engagement were asked to contribute articles: from the local church, Dr. Ruth Panganiban-Billena of Ellinwood Malate Church then; from the academe, like Rev. Luna I. Dingayan, President of the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Baguio, Rev. Lope Robin, then Dean of the Divinity School, Silliman University, Dr. Mariano Apilado, former President of the Union Theological Seminary, now pastor of the Davao City UCCP, Dr. Muriel Orevilla-Montenegro, the present Dean of the Divinity School; from ecumenical associations and church bodies abroad, Dr. Hope Antone of the Christian Conference of Asia in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Dr. Levi V. Oracion, a fraternal worker sent by the UCC-USA and assigned to the Divinity School.

Papers were also written on various themes or particular issues arising out of each of the articles of the SOF, such as the theme of “The Place of Mary in the Statement of Faith of the UCCP”, from the first article, which may be considered as a radically new protestant, evangelical consideration of a traditionally Catholic icon of faith and obedience; or the theme of “Creation”, also from the first article, which has strong ecological implications for us as God’s stewards.

The contributors therefore represent quite a colorful mix of the various theological voices that provide the leadership and pioneering efforts in the formulation of new interpretations of various faith issues and theological themes found in our SOF. One common ground however that continued to unite the writers in each stage of this whole project was the deep concern for a more theologically aware and more missionary and ethically conscious constituency of the UCCP.

The commentaries submitted were then subjected to a series of discussion and reactions from fellow writers and contributors in a series of consultations, enabling the contributors then to further improve and refine their respective articles through the supportive feedbacks of their colleagues. Some articles were revised six times by the writers themselves. The process of revising one's article in consultation after consultation took almost the whole year of 2005. This was also the time when the Faith and Order Commission then also became actively involved with the thematic preparations for the coming next General Assembly and the new quadrennium (2006-2010).

Even then, there was much hope and great expectation that this collection of commentary articles, already a product of a long sustained collective effort, commitment and passion of each writer-contributor will be out and will be launched during the General Assembly in 2006 in Digos, Davao. Unfortunately, some serious technical glitches, like a computer crash (fortunately, a copy of the submitted articles have been saved separately) and the inability of some writers to beat the deadline forced the editors to defer or postpone indefinitely its coming off the press and its subsequent launching.

Finally, after another quadrennium and at the beginning of a new one, and through the patient and persistent shepherding and coordinating task of Ms. Edna Orteza this book is finally out. The Faith and Order Commission of the past two quadrennia certainly had been so privileged and blessed to be given this very momentous and special task. It is our hope that in spite of the long delay spanning two quadrennia this book of commentaries on our Statement of Faith is worth the long wait itself.

As the title of the book suggests, **“Unless a Seed Falls and Dies”**, which is taken from the words of Jesus in John 12:24, (an expanded exposition of this biblical title by Dr. Everett Mendoza is found in the Introduction of this volume) this whole set of commentaries attempts to provide a dynamic continuity to the previous volume of commentary, **Like a Mustard Seed**. That is, the seed that the first volume had sown through its articles is now envisioned to provide the basis for further growth, for the germination, sprouting out of the ground and eventual bearing of fruit in terms of the faithful's deeper understanding of the meaning of our Christian faith today as expounded now in this volume. This is what we in the FOC hope to achieve as this book is now made available as one important study mater that we can keep along in our continuing journey of faith as we seek discernment, understanding and guidance for our life of witness and service in light of the critical challenges that we as a church are facing these days.

This writing and publication project would not have been possible at all without the dedicated and collective effort put into it by the members of the Faith and Order Commission of the 2002-2006 and 2006-2010 quadrennia and the other invited writers and contributors mentioned here already. Together, they acted also as an editorial committee for this project. We need to mention however the extra time and effort reviewing and editing the articles by Dr. Muriel O. Montenegro and Dr. Levi Oracion, together of course, with the tireless and passionate guidance by Ms. Edna Orteza who provided the much needed continuity in coordinating and seeing through the project even in the midst of the various obstacles it faced along the way.

Finally, we thank the leadership of the UCCP in the past two quadrennia, for their continuing support to this project, culminating in their facilitating the necessary means by which this work can finally be published and made available to our constituency. Still, we offer our praise and thanks to our God for the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit by which the writers and contributors to this project, in spite of the various obstacles faced along the way were able to complete this book of commentaries to our Statement of Faith. May our constituency find in this book somethign of value for their own growth in the understanding of their faith and mission in today's critical times.

**The Faith and Order Commission  
2002-2006, 2006-2010**

## **Unless a Seed Falls and Dies: The Evolution**

This book of commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith had taken a long and tedious process indeed.

Before the General Assembly of 2002, there were two versions of the Statement of Faith in circulation: a longer version and another as revised by the Faith and Order Commission in 1992. This caused confusion among the local churches. A call was then sent out to the conferences, inviting them to participate in a process of study and possible amendment to the 1992 version as proposed. However, except for Davao City Church and Rev. Vicente Espinosa, there was no response that came from the conferences up to the time of the 2002 General Assembly. Thus, it was presumed that what may be needed by the churches was not a new version but more of a process that will guide them towards a deeper and a more dynamic understanding of the Statement of Faith.

It was at the General Assembly in Baguio in 2002 when the 1992 revised version of the UCCP Statement of Faith by the Faith and Order Commission was approved for the general use of the church constituency. The General Assembly also approved a proposal for the Faith and Order Commission to come up with study materials on this present version of the Statement of Faith which will supplement, as well as update the first commentary of the Statement of Faith, **Like a Mustard Seed**, which came out in 1987. An updated commentary became of more critical importance when it was realized that the commentaries were on the much earlier version of the UCCP Statement of Faith.

Subsequently, through a series of meetings and consultations, the Faith and Order Commission started the process of producing a new set of commentaries intended to help the church constituencies develop a deeper understanding of the theological foundations and the practical, ethical and missiological implications of each of the articles of the revised version of the Statement of Faith.

Thus, the commentaries for each of the six articles of the Statement of Faith were farmed out and assigned to various members and consultants of the Faith and Order Commission. Some other writers in various fields of engagement were asked to contribute articles: from the local church, Dr. Ruth Panganiban-Billena of Ellinwood Malate Church then; from the academe, like Rev. Luna I. Dingayan, President of the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Baguio, Rev. Lope Robin, then Dean of the Divinity School, Silliman University, Dr. Mariano Apilado, former President of the Union Theological Seminary, now pastor of the Davao City UCCP, Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, the present Dean of the Divinity School; from ecumenical associations and church bodies abroad, Dr. Hope Antone of the Christian Conference of Asia in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Dr. Levi V. Oracion, a fraternal worker sent by the UCC-USA and assigned to the Divinity School.

Papers were also written on various themes or particular issues arising out of each of the articles of the SOF, such as the theme of “The Place of Mary in the Statement of Faith of the UCCP”, from the first article, which may be considered as a radically new protestant, evangelical consideration of a traditionally Catholic icon of faith and obedience; or the theme of “Creation”, also from the first article, which has strong ecological implications for us as God’s stewards.

The contributors therefore represent quite a colorful mix of the various theological voices that provide the leadership and pioneering efforts in the formulation of new interpretations of various faith issues and theological themes found in our SOF. One common ground however that continued to unite the writers in each stage of this whole project was the deep concern for a more theologically aware and more missionary and ethically conscious constituency of the UCCP.

The commentaries submitted were then subjected to a series of discussion and reactions from fellow writers and contributors in a series of consultations, enabling the contributors then to further improve and refine their respective articles through the supportive feedbacks of their colleagues. Some articles were revised six times by the writers themselves. The process of revising one’s article in consultation after consultation took almost the whole year of 2005. This was also the time when the Faith and Order Commission then also became actively involved with the thematic preparations for the coming next General Assembly and the new quadrennium (2006-2010).

Even then, there was much hope and great expectation that this collection of commentary articles, already a product of a long sustained collective effort, commitment and passion of each writer-contributor will be out and will be



launched during the General Assembly in 2006 in Digos, Davao. Unfortunately, some serious technical glitches, like a computer crash (fortunately, a copy of the submitted articles have been saved separately) and the inability of some writers to beat the deadline forced the editors to defer or postpone indefinitely its coming off the press and its subsequent launching.

Finally, after another quadrennium and at the beginning of a new one, and through the patient and persistent shepherding and coordinating task of Ms. Edna Orteza this book is finally out. The Faith and Order Commission of the past two quadrennia certainly had been so privileged and blessed to be given this very momentous and special task. It is our hope that in spite of the long delay spanning two quadrennia this book of commentaries on our Statement of Faith is worth the long wait itself.

As the title of the book suggests, “**Unless a Seed Falls and Dies**”, which is taken from the words of Jesus in John 12:24, (an expanded exposition of this biblical title by Dr. Everett Mendoza is found in the Introduction of this volume) this whole set of commentaries attempts to provide a dynamic continuity to the previous volume of commentary, **Like a Mustard Seed**. That is, the seed that the first volume had sown through its articles is now envisioned to provide the basis for further growth, for the germination, sprouting out of the ground and eventual bearing of fruit in terms of the faithful’s deeper understanding of the meaning of our Christian faith today as expounded now in this volume. This is what we in the FOC hope to achieve as this book is now made available as one important study mater that we can keep along in our continuing journey of faith as we seek discernment, understanding and guidance for our life of witness and service in light of the critical challenges that we as a church are facing these days.

This writing and publication project would not have been possible at all without the dedicated and collective effort put into it by the members of the Faith and Order Commission of the 2002-2006 and 2006-2010 quadrennia and the other invited writers and contributors mentioned here already. Together, they acted also as an editorial committee for this project. We need to mention however the extra time and effort reviewing and editing the articles by Dr. Muriel O. Montenegro and Dr. Levi Oracion, together of course, with the tireless and passionate guidance by Ms. Edna Orteza who provided the much needed continuity in coordinating and seeing through the project even in the midst of the various obstacles it faced along the way.

Finally, we thank the leadership of the UCCP in the past two quadrennia, for their continuing support to this project, culminating in their facilitating the necessary means by which this work can finally be published and made available to our constituency. Still, we offer our praise and thanks to our God for the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit by which the writers and contributors to this project, in spite of the various obstacles faced along the way were able to complete this book of commentaries to our Statement of Faith. May our constituency find in this book something of value for their own growth in the understanding of their faith and mission in today’s critical times.

**The Faith and Order Commission  
2002-2006, 2006-2010**

## **What the Writers Say**

The Statement of Faith of UCCP summarizes the teachings or “dogmas” or “doctrines” that the church takes to be necessary in defining its identity. As a critical discipline, dogmatics, which is the study of these decreed teachings, is viewed to be the “antidote to dogmatism”. It is therefore crucial that commentators on these teachings bring into their work critical insights to redeem dogmatics from “uncritical dogmatism.”

In the first article, Mariano Apilado reminds us that creeds emerged from Christians’ responses to Jesus’ questions for their time. In his essay, he outlines the purpose and place of creeds in the history of the church. Creeds points to the faith community’s identity and mission, its location and direction in life and their faith practice. Moreover, creeds do not only express the creativity of the believers in living out their faith in God; they also serve as a “unifying force” in the midst of diverse Christian traditions and practices. Creeds functions as markers of the nodal points of the faith community’s journey and indicates the “interaction of faith and practice.”

Why a Statement of Faith? Levi V. Oracion reminds us that a faith community such as the Christian church must be able to articulate what it believes. Each member of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines must be able to

give an account of one's faith and stand for it. He asks: 'how could others understand and know who we are and why we believe what we believe if we could not state what we believe?' Thus, he outlines some basic reasons why a statement of faith is necessary for the church.

In his essay on the Triune God, Everett Mendoza shows that the gospel story of God's graciousness is the "theological matrix" of the doctrine of the Triune God is anchored in the gospel story. Biblical testimonies show that the Spirit is both of God and of Christ. God cannot be moved by human manipulation, but this God is compassionate and grieves over human sinfulness. God speaks to people and God's Spirit moves them. Jesus was the embodiment of God's grace that heals the whole creation of its corruption and brokenness. Through the Holy Spirit, we receive God's grace in its richness. Thus, Christians' knowledge of God is mediated by the symbol of the Triune God: the Parent God, the Son and Holy Spirit

Considering the state of ecological degradation, Lope Robin reflects on the challenge for the church to truly affirm that God is the Creator of the universe and source of life. God exercises power in and through creation to sustain life. With the assertion that no one and nothing can exist apart from God's sovereignty, human beings must strive to make stronger the bond between them and their creator. The reality of natural evil points to the finitude of creation. The church, however, is urged to work towards the elimination of moral evil and suffering brought about by humanity's greed and hubris.

In his article, *God Became Human*, Luna Dingayan asserts that the primary challenge human beings face today is how to be truly human. God in Jesus Christ became human to show us "what it means to be truly human." (p.5) It is only in becoming truly human that we are able to reflect the divine image of God in us, and resist the temptation to "usurp the position of God or to play like God." To be truly human means living a life that proclaims God's reign as Jesus did. To confess that God became human in Jesus Christ means that believers acknowledge that their God is one who identifies with the suffering world and its hopes.

Ruth Panganiban-Billena notes that God's presence in the world is mediated by the Holy Spirit. Rendered in Hebrew as the feminine dimension of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit is the vivifying power that breathes life to creation. The Holy Spirit is the "fountain of empowering gifts" that makes discern the signs of the times and make the reign of God a reality. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the spring of compassion that comforts the lonely and the distressed.

Levi Oracion's essay on Jesus Christ articulates an understanding of Jesus as one so steeped in God. Thus, Jesus "was able to realize himself as the most authentic articulation of divine righteousness and grace within the structures of humanity." Jesus is God's incarnation that expressed God's solidarity with the wretched of the earth. Incarnation, therefore, introduces a powerful revolutionary force for truth and justice in human history. Jesus' death on the cross points to the radicality of human depravity manifest in "human act of murdering God." Yet, his resurrection unveiled the radical openness of the human reality to God, of a life of passion to embody God's love.

In the Protestant Reformed tradition followed by the UCCP, very little space is given to Mary. Many UCCP members even confused Mariology, the articulation of the place of Mary in the Christian faith, with Mariolatry that views Mary as a deity to be worshipped. Muriel Oreillo-Montenegro challenges the readers to take Mary from a different and new perspective. It means re-reading the Bible and redeeming Mary from the patriarchal mold and interpretations. Consequently, the readers are urged to go back to the Bible and re-discover the Mary, the singer of the Magnificat. She asserts that reclaiming the Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a commitment for the transformation of our decadent values and of our corrupt society. Believers are urged to take her as a model of discipleship.

Everett Mendoza writes that Christians have dichotomized the biblical understanding of salvation. Others think of it only in terms of justification and sanctification. Others view it only in terms of the ministry of Jesus towards the realization of God's reign on earth and the redemption of the whole creation of God. This dichotomization bred suspiciousness, mistrust and conflicts. Mendoza insists that UCCP articulates both of these dimensions of the doctrine of salvation as they are not meant to be separated. He suggests therefore that Christians ought to forge mutual support, cooperation, dialog, charity, and appreciation of gifts from one Spirit.

From a feminist perspective, Muriel Oreillo-Montenegro challenges the reader to discern fresh insights on the nature of person being created in God's image. She suggests that we dig deeper into the scriptural narratives and read these with the use of multiple lenses such as experience, culture, gender, ethnicity, race and class. God's essence is the fullness of life. To reflect the image of God means to practice the teachings of Jesus who embodies God's love and truth. It demands that human beings honor and celebrate God's gift of life, and participate in God's creativity to build a just and peaceful world. Human beings must learn to live in community and make life flourish for all peoples and creatures in this earth.

The Bible, Noriel Capulong proffers, is "like a two edged sword." As the word of God, it must be understood in its creative and prophetic dimensions. The Bible especially witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as the

Word of God. Capulong stresses that the authority of the Bible must be considered always in two ways, that is, in relational and communal contexts. He warns against the misappropriation of the authority of the Bible to endorse projects of domination and subjugation of the vulnerable individuals and nations. Capulong outlines for the reader some tips on how to study the Bible so that one will be enlightened and one's faith journey will be enhanced.

In his commentary on the nature of the church, Erme R. Camba highlights three images, namely: the church as the body of Christ, the church as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic," and the church as the "household of God." As Christ's body, the church has many parts and gifts for the continuation of Christ's ministry. This ministry is intertwined with God's mission in this world. As the church moves towards the presence of God, the Holy Spirit endows it with holiness that is requisite "for its witness to the justice of God." It is catholic or universal because by God's grace and in Christ, we become God's children. Camba suggests that the image of the church of Jesus Christ as the household of God is biblically grounded and appropriately Filipino.

Reuel Norman O. Marigza outlines some affirmations of the kingdom of God. It is a mystery that works in various ways and means. The Kingdom of God is God's project, and therefore, should not be identified with human projects, institutions, systems and ideologies. However, God works through human beings and institutions to "work out the divine will and purpose." Marigza lifted up the challenge set by the UCCP Statement on Evangelism for Christians to live a life that manifest their citizenship of the Kingdom of God. As the early Christians' "loyalty to God's kingdom sometimes meant a fatal clash with Caesar's visible kingdom," the contemporary Christian's loyalty to God's Kingdom may also clash with the empire of modern times.

Hope S. Antone writes that Jesus used the metaphor of the kingdom of God as an alternative to people's experience of kingdoms at that time. She points to the relational metaphor of the "reign of God" that highlights the bond between God and humanity and all creation. She directs our attention to the paradigm of the "kindom" that reflects not only "a sense of kinship and familial affinity, but also as an affirmation of an inclusive God. The reign of God challenges believers to struggle for and with the poor. The kindom and reign of God is an inclusive possibility for all people. Thus, Antone hopes that the concept of God's "kindom" should lead us to openness towards people of other religions and persuasions who also seek to express their faith in historical projects for social change.

The resurrection of Jesus, Levi V. Oracion affirms, was an act of divine vindication of the life, ministry and the totality of the work of Jesus. The resurrection faith means victory over death. Jesus Christ grants the believer an extraordinary courage to stand for truth, love and justice inasmuch as one knows that God's truth and power of God abides in those who believe. The resurrection of Jesus abolished the power of death, and so people "can face death with extraordinary courage and peace of mind."

In his essay on the Second Coming, Oracion underlines the demand for readiness on the part of the Christians for Jesus' coming again. Readiness means living a life in Christ, a life that participates in God's liberating, reconciling and transformative work in history. The hope of Jesus' coming again invests the future with power, meaning and beauty – an optimism that holds on to God the creator who labored "faithfully to bring all of creation to their fullest and highest consummation."

It is a challenge to the members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines to reflect on what the writers say, and find it enriching in their journey to deepen their faith. From the thoughts of Anselm of Canterbury's famous clause, "faith seeking understanding", Christians are urged to articulate their faith in a lucid and intelligible manner.

**Muriel Oreillo-Montenegro, Ph.D.**

## **The Significance of Creeds in the History of the Church**

**Dr. Mariano C. Apilado**

### **Introduction**

What is the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, or, UCCP, for short? Why is the UCCP so concerned for justice, peace, reconciliation, human rights, liberation and other qualities of a human life of dignity and decency?

This introductory article will discuss specifically the place and significance of creeds and confessions of faith in the history of the church, also known as the people of God, the people of the covenant, the communion of saints, the body of Christ and the herald of the gospel, or, good news.

The purpose is to identify and highlight some of the specific ways that these creeds and statements of faith have been used in the history of God's people from the Old Testament times until the present.

### **Identity and Mission**

One of the original uses of creeds was to indicate the identity and mission of God's people. As the Israelites, one of the original names referring to God's people, prepared to get out of their bondage in Egypt, they were assured through Moses that the God calling them out of their bondage in Egypt to a life of liberation in the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey was the God of their father Abraham, with whom God had made a covenant.

Identity has to do with the condition with being oneself and not somebody else. The identity of the Israelites was that they were God's people and their mission was to obey and follow God for in following God they would escape from their bondage in Egypt and would find liberation and then enjoy the blessings of a land flowing with the milk of justice and the honey of love.

### **Location and Direction**

Another use or significance of creeds or statements of faith is that they served as maps indicating the location and pointing to the direction of life and journey of God's people. In the oft-quoted question of Jesus to his disciples on who he was, Peter expressed the location of his faith encounter when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:13).

Jesus not only commended approvingly Peter's statement of faith, but also went on to indicate the direction to which the statement was leading. "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). Peter's statement of faith signified the state of his faith and Jesus' approval signified the direction to which the statement should lead.

### **Confession and Action**

There is another signification of creeds or statements of faith, and this is confession and action. A confession of faith signifies intellectual understanding of one's life and describes the behavioral conduct that flows out of the statement. Martin Luther's confession of justification by faith as the core foundation of his ministry led him to question the prevailing practice of indulgence.

Also an example that came out of the reformation of the significance of creeds and statements of faith as confession and action was the choice by Martin Luther of the Jewish canon of the Old Testament formulated by the seventy Jewish scholars, the Apocryphal books as a separate section. The other Protestant reformers followed Luther's choice. Consequently, the Council of Trent chose the canon of the Jews in diaspora which called the Apocryphal books as Deutero-canonical books.

### **Faithfulness and Creativity**

There is also the significance of creeds and confession of faith as faithfulness and creativity. This recognizes the spiritual roots of the Christian life and the life and ministry of the church as having been rooted in the doctrinal affirmation that God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Called to be faithful to these spiritual roots, believers are called upon to live creatively through a life that creatively lives the fundamental values of love, peace, truth, justice and freedom.

One of the most popular and also the most universally accepted creeds is the Apostles' Creed, which traditionally has been believed to have been formulated, stated and put together by the apostles themselves. From the beginning it had been used as a standard required of catechumens to memorize. Today, there have been variations of interpretation that attempt to act out creatively the various statements in the creed starting with belief in God and concluding with Jesus' coming again.

### **Unity and Diversity**

There is still another significance of creeds and statements of faith in the history of the church. At various times in history, when confronted by critical problems and persecution, Christians had used creeds and statements of faith as a unifying force. In the Book of Acts, we have the powerful statement of Peter, "We cannot but speak of what we

have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20). Of recent history, there was the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Churches in Germany in defiance of the abuses of Nazism.

There is, of course, the powerful challenge of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1-6, for Christians to lead a life worthy of the calling they have been called with all lowliness and meekness, humility and gentleness. The reason for this challenge is that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. The diversity of our living is unified only by the invitation that all must be worthy.

### **Arrival and Departure**

There is a sixth significance of creeds and statements of faith in the history of the church. This is arrival and departure. Take for example, the history of the UCCP. When the founding fathers came together in 1948, they had arrived at the point of unity and so agreed only on one common statement and message “Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, Our Living Lord and Savior.” It took the church thirty eight years of journeying together to agree in 1986 on a statement of faith. In less than eight years, the statement had been revised in 1992 by the Faith and Order Commission because the church had arrived at another stage in its spiritual journey.

This is to say that life as a journey, or the history of the church, is similar to climbing a mountain. At every moment in the journey or in the history, a people, or the people of God are at once and at the same time at the peak of the past and at the foothill of the future. At the peak of the past, the People of the Covenant give thanks and assess where they have traveled. At the foothill of the future, they plan and prepare carefully for the climb that is ahead.

### **Faith and Engagement**

A seventh way that the significance of creeds and statements of faith may be viewed the interplay of faith and engagement. This is our way of saying that there is a divine root and connection of the life and ministry of the church, there is transcendental dimension of the incarnational manifestation of the church as the People of God. How is this divine connection, also known as spirituality, and this human or historical incarnation, also known as political and economic liberation, engaging each other understood and expressed?

The answer is through creeds and statements of faith. During critical times when there is not only poverty of economic resources and powerlessness of political expression, but also bankruptcy of spiritual presence and poverty of political will, the formulation of reflection, creeds and statements of faith seem a luxury that Christians and the churches cannot have time to engage its life and ministry. And yet, it is precisely in times of crisis and spiritual bankruptcy that affirmation of one’s reason for being and struggle towards becoming are needed to provide vitality and reason for the continuing engagement.

### **Conclusion**

So, what is the UCCP and why is it concerned about the values of justice, liberation, peace, love, truth and compassion? The UCCP is a Church, the Body of Christ, the People of the Covenant and the Herald of the Good News of the Gospel. The church is interested in the values stated above because they are the human expressions of being forgiven and the sharing in the abundance of life promised by Jesus Christ (John 10:10).

The country is in crisis essentially because of the bankruptcy of trust of people in themselves, in others and, lamentably, especially the so-called leaders in politics and economic administration. Unfortunately, there are quite a number of church members who have expressed frustration and disillusionment at the character and conduct of their leaders.

Because of these crises it is often felt by some that the spiritual reason and foundation of our being a people and our continuing struggle has lost its vitality and significance. On the contrary, the history of the church and of the people of God gives an essential reminder that precisely in times when it is difficult to go on that the church need to know and affirm the reason, the spiritual reason to go on.

The depth of the foundation in Jesus Christ is expressed in the confession of where it has arrived in its journey of faith. Such depth is inexhaustible, and so, the continuing search to express in contemporary grammar where it has arrived in its faith experience. The breath of the creativity of faithfulness is limited and located only by the context of such grammar as the people of God consider direction of their faith departure plans. Thus, the church as the people of God continues to respond to the challenge to confess appropriately and contextually its faith as it considers the time and direction of its continuing journey.

During these critical times, it is both urgent and essential that church leaders and members alike are called upon to make a statement categorically of its faith location and direction in response to Jesus' admonition, "If you continue in my word, you will be my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31, 32). For the continuing journey towards the truth and freedom goes on!

## **Why A Statement of Faith**

**Levi V. Oracion**

It is important to be able to give an account of and apologia for our faith, for it serves as the core summary of what we understand as to who we are and what our reason is for living. If we really believe what we confess we believe, then it will serve as the rudder by which we steer our lives and struggle for causes whose interests seem remote to our own personal security.

The faith of the UCCP did not come about in a willful and arbitrary manner; there is a very human and beautiful story behind it. It is a story that goes back to biblical times where spiritual giants of the race like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses—to name an outstanding few, encountered what they felt to be the ultimate reality, and were drawn out of their ordinary lives to be engaged in a dialogue and covenant with God that they found to be most fulfilling and utterly revelatory of the truth about themselves, their world, and thereby also of the nature of the God they encountered and render obedience to.

It finally reached its ultimate culmination in the coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, whose ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and promised return, whose entrance into our lives and our history revealed the meaning of our existence, the courage and the power by which we live out that meaning. It is a story that has a depth and complexities and that engage the full range of our humanity—including our anxieties, search for meaning, desire for security, passion for wholeness and for that realization of who we are by the truth that fully verifies who we are. So, here are the reasons why we need a statement of faith.

1. Our statement of faith reminds us that we, as the faithful of the UCCP, are a people whose history is of a piece with the history of God's people that begun way back in biblical times. It is a story that gives rhyme and reason to our existence, and gives answers to life's fundamental questions that are verified by a serious and holy living, and gives meaning and power in rendering obedience to the principal Actor in the story.
2. Our statement of faith gives us the symbols that capture the wholeness of faith that gives us a sense of unity with the people of God, a sense of who we are, of why we are doing what we are doing, and a sense of direction where we are going. It gives us a sense of understanding of self and world, of the quality of our life, of the work we do, and of our destiny.
3. Our statement of faith specifies not only our ecclesial unity within the UCCP, but also of our historic origins and affinities with other great bodies of faith that define their being as determined and given shape and direction by God's act in Jesus Christ, ecclesial bodies that, in spite of our separation from them, are truly and essentially our sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ.
4. Our statement of faith is exclusive in an essential way; it belief, submission and obedience to Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior; but it is inclusive in a pragmatic way because the God who redeemed, gives courage and empowers us to rise to authentic humanity, loves all human beings and cares for the whole of Creation as well; and we declare that we submit to none other. But Christ's love for us leads us to care for and to love all the peoples of the earth and of all Creation. Other well-meaning members of the human family may have found other messiahs and redeemers also; and declaration of faith in a merciful, loving and gracious God, whose love cannot be bounded by any human creed or lore, allows us to affirm the possibility that they are ensconced in God's love and truth as well.
5. Our statement of faith is a prism by which we may be guided in a broad and liberal way in the interpretation of the Bible and of how it may illumine the problems and puzzles, the anxieties and agonies and the possibilities and prospects of whatever situation we may be thrown in.

6. Our statement of faith is a bulwark of security in a world awash with various creeds, ideologies and philosophies that are ever seeking to lure people in novel and daring ways. A long, hard look at our statement of faith should put us again in touch with the faith of our mothers and fathers that have been tested in stressful and stormy times and is found to fulfill their most authentic being and deepest dreams.
7. Our statement of faith is a critical point from which we grasp and shape our self and the world, and engage in dialogue with other faith perspectives and ideologies. Within our statement of faith is a broad and deep understanding of God and human beings that is faithfully rooted in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, that can dynamically and creatively engage in a fruitful interchange with the world. There is a core within the statement of faith, an unchanging essence and truth, that needs to be re-articulated in every clime and culture—for these confront the church with their own unique ways and modes of thought and being, and begs the faithful to speak out of the essence, meaning and power of their faith—as it is enshrined in their statement of faith.

## **The Doctrine of the Triune God**

**Everett L. Mendoza**

### **Introduction**

The Christian understanding of God is derived from the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. It tells of a God who sent his Son into the world (Gal. 4:4) and, through him, the Holy Spirit (Jn. 15:26) in order to save it from sin and to renew it. The Son came as a human being — suffered and died — and returned to the Father in glory. The Spirit came upon the believers transforming their lives and teaching and empowering them to proclaim the story of Jesus. The New Testament church believed that all glory and honor that pertain to God also belong to the Son (Jn. 5:23; Phil. 2:9-11).

### **A. Christ's Divinity and the Trinitarian Belief**

Relying on the trustworthiness of the New Testament testimony about Jesus, the ancient church took a giant step towards the formulation of Christian doctrines by declaring in a most explicit and unequivocal way the divine nature of Christ. For, if Christ were not of the same nature as God then God has not been fully, sufficiently and effectively available for the salvation of humankind from sin. The real question behind the Christological controversies was whether the fullness of salvation that only God could bring down to earth had been obtained through Jesus Christ. Only one who is truly God can accomplish that; a demigod or a divine creature, in other words one who is less than God would be sorely wanting. In the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325), the church declared Christ to be truly human and truly God.

With that declaration, it became necessary for the church to formulate a doctrine of God that would correspond to the doctrine of Christ, hence, the doctrine of the Trinity. What the biblical writers naturally avoided as a matter of reverence to God, the ancient church dared to do. With much trepidation and pain, the church sought to construct a definition of God. If Christ is truly God, do Christians believe in two Gods? How can one worship Christ and also claim that there is only one God?

In order to bring rational consistency and coherence to the Christian faith, the Church Fathers embarked on the path of philosophical and mystical speculation. For the church, the true knowledge that saves is that which pertains to Jesus Christ as testified to by the Apostles who were actual witnesses to the Christ event. By this knowledge, a believer comes to know God and the way to God (Jn. 14:6-9). On the other hand, God as God is in the eternal realm remains unknowable and inaccessible to human understanding (I Tim. 6:16), thus, every attempt to penetrate the darkness of God's hiddenness is not only an exercise in futility but also a dangerous practice that betrays human hubris.

In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity is a faith-declaration about God *in terms of* the Christian knowledge of Christ. For the Christian believer, the doctrine of God is but a reflection or a derivative of the knowledge of Christ, not the other way around. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, is not a precise definition of God but the appropriate way of speaking about God *corresponding* to the revealed knowledge of Christ, the divine Savior. Historically, the Trinitarian formulation (Chalcedon, 451) came in the heels of the long and acrimonious battle (318-381) for Christ's true divinity.

## **B. Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of the Trinity**

### **New Testament Testimony**

In the New Testament, salvation happens through the triple action of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (e.g., Eph. 4:4-6; Gal. 4:6; II Cor. 13:14). Creation and its final consummation are divine activities that also involve the Son (Col. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:24-25). Divine grace emanates both from the Father and from Christ (Gal. 1:3) while it is the Spirit who endows the church with spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 13:4 ff.).

In addition, the New Testament also defines the fundamental way by which one acts in relation to the other within the divine motion. Between the three, it is the Father who begets the Son and with the Son sends forth the Spirit. The Son alone has seen the Father (Jn. 6:47) and the Spirit alone knows the thoughts of God (I Cor. 2:11). The Spirit is both of God (Rom. 8:14) and of Christ (II 3:17). The Father, the Son and the Spirit belong to one another and co-operate in every way and at each instance in dealing with the world.

### **Old Testament Roots**

The gospel story redefines in a radical way the Old Testament understanding of God. The Law and the Prophets testify to a God who is in heaven and yet available on earth. The God who dwells where no one, including Moses, is allowed to see was the same one who accompanied the people in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21-22). God is immovable and beyond human manipulation, yet this God is moved by compassion and grieves over the tragedy of human sinfulness.

Through his word God speaks to people and by his Spirit God moves them. God's nearness and availability are conveyed through the agency of the prophetic word and the movement of the Spirit. The God of heaven is represented on earth by those upon whom his word and spirit come. Although God's representatives do not actually make God present, they communicate the power and effects of his real presence. In other words, through divine intermediaries, the God who dwells in heaven becomes present and available on earth. Utterly unapproachable, yet intimately available is the kind of God whom Jesus and the early church knew.

Jesus actualized the paradoxical reality of God in his own life, and those who believed him to be the very Son of God came upon a radically new understanding of the God of the Old Testament. For them, Jesus did not only represent God to convey God's grace but he was really God in person, the very embodiment of divine grace. He was more than a prophet who spoke God's word; he was God's very Word manifest in the flesh.

## **C. Classical Formulation of the Trinity**

*God is One yet Three. God is Three yet One.* That's how the ancient church put the mystery of God which cannot be likened to any earthly relation. So, every attempt to explain the intra-divine relation in terms of interpersonal relationships tends to bring more confusion than understanding. The Trinitarian understanding of God belongs to a discourse that pertains exclusively to the Christian understanding of God and cannot be reduced to any other object of human comprehension.

The formula is a two-dimensional view representing the contrasting philosophical and mystical bents of the Western/Latin and the Eastern/Greek churches of the time. Foremost in the mind of the Western churches was to preserve belief in one God and then strived to use analogies from nature to explain the specific distinctions within the Godhead as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the Eastern churches sought to preserve the distinct hypostases or individualities of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and went on to say that, nevertheless, the Three are eternally one in essence, *mia ousia*, in power and in glory and mutually indwelling and co-operating in every action, in all things and in every way.

Where the stress is on God's unity/oneness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit refer to three *modes* of God's being, no more no less, that necessarily inhere in one divine reality. For example (analogy), love: it is necessary for love to have one who loves, an object of love and the act/power of loving, which are but modes of being love, a singular reality. Where the stress is on the distinctions, Father, Son and Holy Spirit refer to three distinct *motions* that constitute the wholeness of divine action. Creation, for example, is by the Father (generating) with the Son (objectively mediating God to creation) and the Holy Spirit (subjectively mediating creation to God).

As symbolic images and linguistic renditions of God, these do not purport to be identical with the "isness" of God. But it is necessary for Christians to adopt a Trinitarian view of God in order to uphold the belief in the full and true divinity of Christ, which is necessary to the Christian doctrine of salvation. Stated in another way, we obtain real and full salvation in that Christ is truly God since God is Triune. Or, if God were not Triune, then Christ is not truly God and there is no salvation in Christ. In the final analysis only one thing matters in the Christian faith: **salvation**



from God through Christ (Acts 16:31). The two-nature doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Triune God came into being in the history of the church for the sole purpose of preserving and perpetuating the Christian understanding of salvation.

#### **D. A Contemporary Reconstruction of the Doctrine of the Trinity**

Third World reality, and that of the Philippines in particular, is characterized by poverty and economic injustice suffered by the majority of the people. There is also widespread and systematic suppression and violation of human rights by state and private agents of the status quo against the conscious and organized poor who seek redress of legitimate grievances and liberation from exploitative economic and social relations.

The entire oppressive social system thrives under the auspices and protection of a global political and economic order that favors the major capitalist centers of the world at the expense of the nature-rich but poverty-stricken nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The clash of national and people's interests and those of imperialist and elitist power blocs finds political expression in people's wars against national and class oppression. People's wars inevitably spawn strategies that involve the use of ordinary citizens in the state's counterinsurgency operations. The nation is split right down the middle, dividing families, breaking up communities and sundering the unity of the church.

The Philippine reality has another grim side: the systematic and unabated destruction of nature for private profit. Four centuries of Spanish and American colonization has established an economy that depends on the exportation of natural resources for its very survival. Moreover, the mass of dispossessed and marginalized peasant families finish off, for sheer survival, what is left of nature's capacity to regenerate itself. Thus, the present generation of Filipinos who have known only poverty even have no future to fight for.

In the midst of such a reality, who is this God that the church proclaims? God is the eternal One who calls us from non-being or being-unto-death (poverty, powerlessness, oppression), to being or being-unto-life (freedom, justice, peace, prosperity). God stands yonder, transcendent in the realm of freedom and power, beyond our existential situation of poverty and powerlessness. God transcends all that we are but seeks our fellowship by calling us into the divine realm where freedom is. In God we find the very possibility of transcending the present.

Furthermore, God causes the divine self to be with us in our daily life and to endure the very miseries and humiliation which have become our lot on earth. In Christ's life and work, God shows us the way to overcome sin in all its forms and to practice the true calling of humankind which is the pursuit of truth, justice and freedom. By Jesus' obedience unto death, God denied all the powers of evil victory over a good man, and transformed the unjust killing of a righteous man into a divine instrument to bring justice to earth. By raising Jesus from the dead, God gave new life to a victim of human wickedness and made him the first-fruit of God's vindication and elevation to glory of all who suffer and died for the sake of God's righteousness.

Finally, God is also the one who enables us to hear his offer and promise of freedom, to long for its fulfillment and to work for its actual realization. It is God's Spirit who creates the miracle of making the impossible possible, the miracle of God's becoming one of us and the miracle of our recognition and acceptance of God's coming to us — the miracle of the divine-human encounter in history. It is by the power of the Spirit in us that we dare to transcend our historical existence of poverty, injustice and powerlessness in order to become what we have never been and to give this new order of being concrete historical form.

#### **Conclusion**

The One gracious God is, therefore, the *transcendent author* and source of our freedom (the One who transcends our historical circumstances characterized by poverty, injustice and powerlessness), our *comrade* in the struggle (the One who participates in our suffering and struggles for liberation from such a historical circumstance), and the *power* in us (the One who enables us to envision the future promised by God, sustaining and empowering the just to struggle for it) by which freedom is attained. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is known in the symbol of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Prepared by:

Rev. Everett L. Mendoza

# **We Believe in God the Creator**

**Lope B. Robin**

## **Introduction**

In humble acceptance of the task given to me by the Faith and Order Commission of our Church I am happy to share with my fellow believers my reflection and thought on one of the first three key words of the first article of the UCCP Statement of Faith. Specifically, I will be dealing with our faith in God, the Creator. It is my hope that my humble thought and reflection on this topic will stimulate the faithful to further reflect on the meaning and significance of our faith in God the creator in our contemporary situation. More importantly, I sincerely wish that through this article the constituents of the UCCP would see vividly the implications of affirming such faith in the face of the world's ecological crisis. That by doing a serious reflection on the present ecological situation, the members of the church would realize the urgency of making a relevant and responsive witness to their faith amid the prevailing environmental realities. Then the church people would be motivated to translate into concrete actions their faith that will eventually bring back the beauty and harmony of the entire creation.

## **God is the Author of Creation**

The very first verse of the first book of the Bible declares: “*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1).*” Obviously, the writer of Genesis has a profound faith conviction that God is the author of creation. As witnessed by the Scriptures, creation begins when God said, “*let there be...*” Consequently, from formless and void earth came out a fascinating creation decorated with different kinds of plants and animals that are pleasing to the eyes of the creator. However, it is important to underscore that while God is pleased with what God has created, it does not mean that the creator brings creation into existence for God's own caprices nor God was compelled by anyone to do so. Rather God created the whole creation simply out of overflowing grace and self-giving love. In other words the act of creating itself is a concrete expression of the graciousness of God. Hence creation is an act of grace. This means that the grace of God did not only start working in the world at the time of Abraham's calling or upon God's coming on earth in the flesh in Jesus Christ but it was already active at the beginning of creation.

To affirm God created everything out of sheer grace is in a way saying something that pertains to the character of God, whose love and graciousness are expressed in creation. Indeed the beautiful creation tells us something about the love and goodness of God. For everything that God has created expresses the true nature of God. In line with this, it is significant to emphasize that God intentionally brought creation into being because God loves to have fellowship with others. Inasmuch as God is a fellowship of three persons mutually indwelling with each other, bringing the entire creation into being shows that God wants to share the fellowship with others. That is by letting others to experience and feel the beauty of the fellowship with the Triune God. It is because God loves community. And the community that God loves so dearly is a fellowship between God and humanity together with all other creatures. In other words God's intent is for the community to reflect the very nature of the Triune God who is a community of three persons in mutual existence. The deliberate emphasis of the writer of the creation narrative on God's appreciation upon seeing what God has created suggests serious attachment and love of the creator for the whole creation.

Moreover, through the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis we know that the first activity being undertaken by God in the world was to create everything that the human eye can see. The sun, moon, stars, valleys, mountains, seas, rivers, different species of fishes and other creatures, variety of plants, huge and tiny animals, including living organisms that the naked eye cannot see and finally, the human beings, are all creatures of God. Such creative divine activity is undertaken in a significantly orderly manner. God puts everything in its proper place with a well-defined role to play wherein everyone in the created order is harmoniously complementing with each other making creation beautiful and good. Obviously, this amazing grandeur of creation indicates that it has been in the eternal mind of God to create the entire cosmos and everything that is in it.

## **God is the Source of Everything that Exists**

Being the author of creation, God is the absolute source of everything that exists. In the words of the Psalmist, “*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. . . (Psalm 24:1).*” This biblical testimony is indeed a profound affirmation of faith that the origin of creation is God alone. Absolutely, God the creator is the one giving existence to everything

that we can see in the face of the earth. This means all living creatures that creep on the ground, swim in the waters, fly in the air and human beings alike cannot exist apart from God. Everything on earth will continue to exist because the gracious God wills for it. Moreover, the above affirmation of the Psalmist is a powerful argument against the idea that creation was a product of the work of a certain craftsman who painstakingly “imposes form and order on preexisting matter.”<sup>1</sup> Since the world was formless and void before God created the heavens and the earth it thus follow that no living being that has ever existed before God started the act of creating. For God alone is the source and beginning of creation.

The biblical affirmation that God is the absolute source of everything simply means that all we can see in the face of the earth comes from and belongs to God alone. This also serves as a reminder for everyone in our present time that no one has the right to claim absolute ownership of anything in God’s creation. More so, everyone of us has to bear in mind that the land, water, fish, birds, and animals of the earth that we deliberately claim as ours are actually do not belong to us. Let us always bear in mind that being the last to be created in the order of creation indicates that human being is given the responsibility of maintaining and preserving its beauty and goodness. In other words we are created and placed by God in a particular place in God’s creation to serve as stewards of everything that God has created. So that we have no right to do anything we want especially in exploiting it for the creator has not given us that prerogative. In line with this, we human beings should not behave as lords and masters of the whole creation rather we ought to humbly acknowledge that we, together with the rest of God’s creatures belong to God. In view of this any forms of abuse or disregard of the integrity of God’s creation, is not only an offense against the environment; but also an affront against the creator.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 84.

As we look around our natural environment, we can obviously see proofs that human beings have refused to acknowledge and deliberately undermine that God is the absolute owner of the whole creation. From vantage point we can see the wanton destruction of our environment, an ostensible proof of human abuse and negligence of its responsibility as steward of God’s creation. The earth is suffering from global warming due to sharp increase in temperature, which is actually a direct consequence of human beings neglect, and abuse of the environment. We are all aware that huge percentage of virgin forests are gone, rivers and seas are polluted with toxic wastes resulting to the gradual extinction of different kinds of fish and other creatures whose existence are heavily dependent upon fresh and seawaters. Apparently, the beautiful creation that used to be pleasing to the eyes of its creator has been heavily defaced. There is no doubt that God the creator is displeased by what human being has done to what God has created.

Moreover, in the age of *globalization* that is promoted by rich and powerful countries, the more the environment especially in the Third World countries like the Philippines is threatened. In a show of veneration and support to this modern and deceptive idol, the Philippine Government has opened its doors to multi-national companies and corporations to explore and exploit the country’s natural resources. As embodied in the Mining Act of 1995 (Republic Act 7942) that was authored by the then senator and now president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, foreign mining companies are allowed to explore and engage in mining industries in the Philippines.

This development has posed very serious threat to our environment since “the law allows the use of modern technology, such as open-pit mining and bulk mining that will mine low-grade ore profitably. This, however, will result in the vast destruction of the fertility of the lands, irreparable damage to the environment, and the wiping away of the livelihood of the people in the affected areas.”<sup>2</sup> Certainly, score of families would be displaced especially tribal minorities since the law allows a single company with minimum investment of “US\$50 million may apply for 81,000 hectares of mineral land for a maximum of fifty years.”<sup>3</sup>

Apparently this is a clear arbitrary alteration of God’s design and purpose for creation for it will not only destroy its wholeness and beauty it also threatens the very existence of some people and other creatures who are heavily dependent upon the land and vegetation for life and habitation. Virtually their God given rights to exercise their stewardship of nature and enjoy the fruits of the fields for their existence would be taken away. In view of this, it is significant to stress that another reason why God intentionally created human being as the last in the order of

creation is to ensure that once human being is brought to life everything is in place for the latter's survival and security.

### **God is the Giver of Life**

Being the source of everything that exists, God is the giver of life to human and all other living beings. As the Scriptures succinctly puts it: “*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being*” (Genesis 2:7) This verse indicates that before God breathed into the human's nostrils, human was nothing but mere potted clay. However, when God breathed the *breath of life* human became living being. Obviously, this *breath of life* is not the ordinary air but the divine breath of the living God. The creator God intentionally shares this divine *breath of life* with human being and all living creatures. So that the life of human being and all other living beings come from God alone. It is not taken from anything that God has created but comes from God's very own breath. Indeed, it is a concrete indication of how much God loves every living being that God has created. More importantly, it shows that God is the Being for others whose eternal purpose is to give and share life with creation. Hence the creator is a sharing God who willingly and graciously shares God's own breath so that those who cannot exist on their own can have life and experience what it is to exist. For God is the God of life.

Inasmuch as life is God's own divine breath, it ought to be treated with dignity and respect for the creator loves it so dearly. Hence any act that undermines the value of life is a direct affront to God. This means to love God is to love every living being for everything is as important and valuable to God.

However, it is disheartening to note that as we look around us, we can visibly see different images that negate the value and dignity of human life. Everyday we witness all forms of violence that has cost thousands of lives around the world including our own country, the Philippines.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The United Church Letter*(Oct.-Dec. 1996): 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

### **The Distinction and Relationship between the Creator and the Creature**

Talking about the creator and creation connotes a distinction and relationship. For that reason it is important to stress the distinction between the creator and creature. Essentially this is not a relationship between two co-equal entities, because one is the absolute source of the other's existence, while the former exists in eternity. This is what Daniel Migliore called the “radical otherness, transcendence and lordship of God.” This statement is a profound affirmation that there is an absolute distinction between the creator and the creatures. Based on the biblical witness, creation came into existence in a certain period of history; on the other hand the creator has been in existence before time. At the same time the Bible also affirms that there is intimate relationship between God and creation, whereby not even the rebelliousness of the latter can sever the love and faithfulness of the former.

### **The Creator's Sovereign Freedom**

Inasmuch as out of sovereign freedom the creator brought everything into existence, it is in this same vein that God continues to exercise God's sovereignty over all creation. While out of overflowing love God allows creation to freely exercise its freedom, but in no way leaves it on its own. For the gracious and loving God did not create the entire creation out of a whim but with a definitive purpose. In the process of exercising sovereignty over creation the relationship between God and the creatures is also strengthened. Wherein, the creator continues to show God's love and graciousness to all creation, in return the creatures especially human beings are also expected to reciprocate God's action through faith and obedience. As witnessed by the scriptures, God is pleased by our obedience and faithfulness through worship and by doing what God has commanded us.

Like loving parents who in accordance with culture and tradition give freedom to their grown up children to design their future especially when they are already married, however, it does not mean that the parents would completely cut off their ties with their children. So with God, even sinfulness and waywardness cannot make God abandon creation. For the love of God for creation is much greater than the latter's weaknesses. Looking back in the history of God's people, we know that even if the Israelites for several times had drifted away from the right path that God would have wanted them to tread, still God out of sheer grace would always find ways to summon them through the prophets who in obedience to God asked the people of Israel to redirect their ways in accordance with God's

purpose. In other words God exercises God's sovereignty over creation not to manipulate it but to make it realize that it has a purpose for existence.

### **The Creature's Absolute Dependence upon the Creator**

While the creator does not need creation for eternal existence, on the contrary there is no way that creation can exist apart from the creator. For creation's existence is absolutely dependent upon God. It is a given fact that creation's absolute dependence upon the creator for existence is an essential feature in the relationship between the two. In all aspects, all creatures are absolutely dependent upon the creator for life and for sustenance of such life. For there is no way that creation can live apart from God even it refuses to acknowledge God. And the life that God has given to us is sustained and nourished by the things that God has created. While it is true that God's creatures including human beings have to labor hard to meet their basic needs, but it cannot be denied that God is the giver of strength, wisdom and creativity that enable them to acquire the things that they need.

Moreover, creatures including human beings do not only depend on God for food and other physical needs, but also for good health and well-being. Because of that we always pray for God's protection and guidance for us not to fall into dangers. In fact in all our prayers we always entrust our life to God for it is only in the hands of God that our life is secure. As the scripture says, "with God all things are possible." It is also important to underscore that our dependence on God is not limited only in this earthly existence rather our dependence on God continues even beyond this life.

### **The Good Creation and the Reality of Evil**

The affirmation on the graciousness of God and goodness of creation is severely tested in the face of the reality of evil in the world. In consonance with the biblical testimony, we claim that creation is good and the gracious God is actively at work in the world. But behind this claim we also witness score of people who have been tormented with terminal illness, victims of natural disasters and wars, different forms of injustices victimizing the weak, women and children. One cannot deny the fact that those who have experienced evil and sufferings in their lives have antagonistically raised the question on God's justice. Others have even gone extreme up to the point of questioning the very existence of God. Indeed it is essentially important to address this problem theologically for it poses a serious challenge to one's faith in God who is the author of everything that is good. In so doing it is good to follow our discussion on the two categories of evil made by Christian theology, namely: *natural evil* and *moral evil*.

### **The Natural Evil**

This refers to accidents, terminal illnesses like cancers, AIDS and many more; and natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and the like that have caused so much sufferings upon the people. Undeniably, there are people who attribute those things to God as the one who wills for them to happen. Since God is the source of everything, does it follow that the same gracious God is the cause of all the people's suffering? The answer is a resounding NO. The gracious and loving God did not create evil or suffering nor does God cause it to happen. However, God allows it to happen. At the same time God gives wisdom to human being so that it can be avoided or do something in order to mitigate its impact.

Let us always remember that God's creation is active and dynamic, therefore it is moving for it is not static. Indeed the movement of creation is its way of exercising its freedom and creativity. This is also essential in order to maintain the dynamism of the whole creation. However, in the process of exercising its freedom and creativity almost always such activity would cause suffering upon human beings and other creatures. Like typhoons, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that at times will also cause other disaster like tsunami if it happens under the ocean. Scientific study shows that "a tsunami is thought to be triggered when the ocean floor is tilted or offset during the quake, creating a set of waves similar to the concentric waves generated by an object dropped into water."<sup>4</sup> We have also learned that the so-called "law of nature" which is inherently part of God's gift to creation is designed to direct its movement and dynamism. The creator would not stop these phenomena from happening for if God does so, God is contradicting God-self and it is tantamount to destroying God's own creation for it is an exercise of creation's freedom and creativity.

However, it is also important to stress, that the disastrous effects of the nature's fury has also been caused by human beings irresponsibility or abuse of freedom. More and more natural calamities are attributable to human beings negligence. Some concrete examples to that is the Ormoc tragedy in the province of Leyte in 1991 that killed thousands of innocent people and more recent were the flooding and landslides in the provinces of Aurora and Quezon in Luzon, wherein hundreds of people perished towards the end of 2004. It has been established that the cause of both natural tragedies is the massive denudation of the forests in those areas due to indiscriminate and

irresponsible cutting of trees in the mountains. Moreover, the horrible effect of tsunami that hit some parts of Asia a day before Christmas in 2004 could have been mitigated if only the people did not destroy the mangroves and other trees in the seashores. It just shows that nature is striking back to human beings. In other words the disastrous effect of nature's movement could heavily be attributed to human beings because of their abuse to the environment resulting to nature's imbalance. It is just unfortunate that those who are responsible for the destruction of the environment such as the commercial loggers and miners are often spared from the fury of nature, while the weak and innocent whose existence and habitation are closely linked with nature are almost always the vulnerable victims.

In the face of prevailing ecological crisis resulting to horrible natural disasters that have claimed score of innocent lives in different parts of the severely wounded earth all believers in God the creator have moral and ethical obligation of doing something that would lead to the restoration of the original beauty of creation which used to be pleasing to the eyes of God. The ever-pressing challenge to the church at present is to raise the level of awareness to everyone that we human beings are fellow sojourners with all other creatures of the earth and we are trustees not masters of the rest of God's creation.

Moreover, we have to humbly acknowledge that suffering is part and parcel of our creatureliness. It is inherent of our imperfection. While it is true that everything that God has created is good, but it is never perfect, otherwise creation would be like God. Absolutely, perfection belongs only to God. While creatures including human beings are finite and temporary. Hence in humility we have to acknowledge that limitations and vulnerability are among the inherent characteristics of the creatures. As Daniel Migliore said, "being a finite creature includes the possibility of pain, illness, grief, failure, incapacity, and the certainty of aging and eventual death."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Microsoft Encarta Premium Suite 2005 [database online]

### **The Moral Evil**

Moral evil refers to the suffering and pain inflicted by human beings to their fellow humans. Every time we read newspaper reports and open our television sets we are always greeted with terrifying news about rape cases, robbery, murder, terrorist attacks and many more crimes. However, the most serious form of suffering being experienced by the people worldwide is abject poverty. It is sad to say that the very reason why millions of people are dying of hunger in the Third World countries particularly in Asia and Africa is the greed of a few and powerful individuals, corporations and nations. We cannot deny the fact that these groups of people are amassing wealth by the use of their power, money and influence, while the vast majority of the people are wallowing in lingering poverty. Obviously, they have arbitrarily altered the purpose of the creator for the entire creation. All that God has created is supposed to be enjoyed by every one. But because of human craving for more wealth, some have managed to control a big portion of the wealth of the earth at the expense of the weak and helpless. As one writer once said, "the wealth of the earth is enough for every one but it is never enough for a greedy man." Again this is caused by a misused and abuse of human freedom.

In view of this appalling world scenario, anyone who expresses faith in God the creator and provider of the needs of creation is confronted with a challenge to do something concrete that could reverse the situation and eventually bring back the harmonious relationship between human beings and other creatures when God created the heavens and the earth. Every believer has to realize that God has a compelling demand for the removal of inequalities and injustices in the world. As the saying goes, evil people will prosper if good people will not do something.

### **The Continuing Functions of the Creator**

It is also important to emphasize that God the creator continues to undertake certain functions in creation. In other words the creator's work did not end right on the day when God's creative activity was completed as mentioned in the creation narrative in the book of Genesis. Rather it goes on and on in different dimensions throughout the history of the created order. As we live day by day we experience the work of God who continuously performs new things in our lives and in the rest of God's creation. The very venue of God's continuing activity is none other than the

created world itself. For it is here that God's creation continues to experience God's creative activity. Indeed there is no way that God abandons creation. As witnessed by the scriptures, God is always present in the midst of creation, actively working for it, and never leaving it alone. For the love of God for the whole creation continues to abound. It is absolutely impossible to imagine how creation survives without God.

### **God is the Provider of Creation**

Apparently, creation is dynamic. For creation to continue to exist as such and enjoy the life that God gives, it has essential needs to be met otherwise its existence cannot be sustained. Inasmuch as God created everything out of sheer grace and love it is also in this same vein that after bringing creation into existence the work of God has shifted to providing the basic needs of all living beings. Jesus Christ himself declares, ***“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them (Mathew 6:26)”*** Thus upon completion of the creative work, the function of God has shifted to that of a provider. This means that the work of God has never ceased ever since when the whole process of creating was brought to completion. For it is in the eternal mind of God who purposely created everything, that the beauty and goodness of creation would be maintained.

The design of God for the whole creation as profoundly witnessed by the scriptures is for everyone to have a just and rightful share of the wealth of the earth so that everyone will continue to live. It is never part of the plan of God to let anyone take advantage over others in terms of enjoying the wealth of the earth for survival. The fruits of the trees, the fish in the waters, the animals in the face of the earth, the birds in the air and the mineral resources above and beneath the grounds are created by God to be equally enjoyed by everybody.

---

<sup>5</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding An Introduction to Christian Theology*.

Unfortunately, it is never followed and observed by human being who is supposed to manifest the love and concern for others having been created in God's likeness, whose very life is God's own breath of life. Instead of upholding the intention of God for everyone to equally enjoy the fruits of the earth that God has provided, driven by greed human being has deliberately distorted the plan and purpose of God. Virtually, the more powerful individuals, class and groups of people have denied the rights of the great majority of people who happened to be weak and powerless to enjoy the things that God has provided. In other words, we human beings have altered the grand design of God to ensure the sustenance of everyone in the whole creation. Apparently, human beings no longer acknowledge that God is the creator of the earth and everything therein, hence the sole owner of all things.

If we try to look back history in both biblical and classical perspectives, the problem started when private property was introduced in society. As a result the idea of private property has diminished the true essence of stewardship for it is taken not as a responsibility to care for and share the wealth in God's creation but as a right to use and exploit it for personal advancement. In effect, driven by greedy desire, some people would not hesitate to employ everything possible in their power just to accumulate more riches. One classic example for this is the popular biblical story of the Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21). And we have a lot of similar stories that are happening in our country wherein a number of people have been victimized by land grabbing, worst many have already been summarily executed.

### **God is Accompanying Creation Towards its Destiny**

It is also equally significant to emphasize that God is not only creating and providing the needs of creation but also accompanying it in its journey towards its future destiny. In other words the graciousness of God towards creation was not only demonstrated at the time when God brought creation into being and in providing its needs but also in journeying with it towards the future. Indeed God's continuing presence in the world is mainly to be with God's creatures in every moment of their existence. This also means that God is actively at work in history not only in the history of the Israelites but in other nations as well.

In every chapter of history of nations including the Philippines, God is always there providing inspiration and strength to enable the peoples to move forward in spite of all the odds that they are to encounter. In fact Filipino believers affirm with conviction that God is always in their midst especially in the most critical periods of Philippine

history, such as during the dark period of martial law up to the popular people power uprising known as EDSA I. With the assurance that God is always with us in our journey as a nation let us look forward with burning faith and hope that one day the Filipino people will finally enjoy a genuine freedom where everyone will have a rightful share of the country's wealth.

Our loving God who brought creation into existence and graciously providing its needs, is always standing by our side as we journey towards the future. "God the creator stands at the beginning of every individual human life, gives it unique value and dignity of its own, goes with every one of us on our way, opens up the possibility of new beginnings even when the circumstances of our birth and environment seem to trap and paralyze us."<sup>6</sup> In the face of deteriorating political, economic and socio-cultural climate, where life is getting miserable, it is God's accompanying presence that enables us to move on and hope for a better future in spite of ugly realities that are taking place in the world. Because of God's abiding presence with creation, humanity still finds inspiration to move forward with optimism that life will still improve in the near future. Indeed God's abiding presence is the power that enables the whole creation to move on even if the future looks gloomy and unpromising.

Everyone should realize that the entire creation is not moving towards a pointless future. Indeed the whole creation is moving towards its final destiny that is to be in perfect fellowship with its creator in the reign of God. This is something that creation is eagerly waiting with great anticipation wherein life situation will be perfectly reversed from all its ugliness into a life full of beauty and meaning. It is a condition where perfect harmony among human beings and all other creatures will prevail in the face of the earth. This is precisely the hope of prophet Isaiah as promised by the Lord to him: "*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain says the Lord*" (Isa. 65:25).

In accordance with the testimony of the scriptures, the whole creation is in the process of liberation towards order and harmony where injustice is overcome and replaced with justice and equality. Indeed this is what the apostle Paul emphatically declares in his letter to the Romans: "*that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*" (Romans 8:21). In view of this, instead of taking advantage we should include the environment in our hope for the triumph of justice and peace in the world.

Our vision of the future destiny of creation, which is to be in full fellowship with the creator, makes the prevailing realities intolerable. Hence every professing believer cannot be a passive observer in the face of the present realities in the world. Indeed anyone who sincerely believes in God the creator of all things, openly accepts the challenge of being God's partner in bringing about change in society so that a new reality where the Lordship of the creator is acknowledged and love for every living creature is practiced by everyone.

### **Concluding Statement**

As profoundly witnessed by the scriptures, God's dealing with creation never ended on the day when God rested after bringing the whole creation into existence. Rather the relationship between the creator and creation continues through the ages. Because of God's overflowing love and strong attachment to all creatures God continues to care for the whole creation. Indeed after the act of creating, the work of God has shifted to providing and sustaining creation. And out of the same grace and love God continues to accompany and guide the whole creation as it journeys towards the future. This is an assurance that we ought to keep in our hearts as we move on and face the future with faith and hope that time will come wherein love, justice and genuine freedom for the whole creation will triumph in our land.

### **References**

- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Trans. J. W. et al. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, Trans. & Edited by: G. W. Bromiley. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962.
- Evans, Robert A. and Thomas D. Parker eds. *Christian Theology: A Case Method Approach*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1976.
- Fretheim, Terence E. "The Book of Genesis." In *The New Interpreters' Bible*, edited Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.
- Hanson, Bradley C. *Introduction to Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Hodgson, Peter C. and Robert H. King. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.



*A Statement of Concern on the Effect of the Philippine Mining Act of 1995*. The United Church Letter. October-December 1996. Microsoft Encarta Premium Suite 2005 [database online].

Machen, Gresham. *God the Creator: Introduction to the Christian Faith*. An excerpt from The Westminster Presbyterian [database online] available from <http://members.aol.com.rcigrace/creator.html>.

## **God Became Human Understanding the Christ in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

**Luna I. Dingayan**

*We believe*

*That in Jesus Christ... God became human  
And is sovereign Lord of life and history*

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples in Ceasaria Philippi, “*Who do you say I am?*” (cf. Mk. 8:29; Mt.16:15; Lk.9:20). This is a very important question to which we should make a meaningful response even as we try to make sense of the Christ in our own life. Peter’s response to the question was a profound theological affirmation reflecting the faith of the Early Church: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*”

But who is Christ for us today? Where is Christ in our contemporary life? Like Peter, we declare in our Statement of Faith, “*That in Jesus Christ... God became human, and is sovereign Lord of life and history.*” And so, how do we understand the Christ in our Statement of Faith?

### **Becoming Human**

First of all, we affirm in our Statement of Faith that **God became human in Jesus Christ**. How do we understand this declaration of faith?

#### **A. Centrality of the Human –**

The Statement implies that the human is central in God’s work. In the Biblico-theological tradition, God’s activity is clearly centered on the human. God created the world for the human to live and enjoy (cf. Gen. 1-2; Ps. 8). Salvation history is a history of God’s continuous struggle to liberate the human from the forces of evil and death. God as revealed in and through Jesus’ life and message should be understood in this light.

The concern for the human is at the heart of Jesus’ mission. Even a cursory review and analysis of his mission statements and practices as recorded in the Gospels would reveal this fact.

According to the Gospel of Mark, which is considered the earliest gospel, Jesus claimed that he did not come to be served but “to serve and to give his life to redeem many people”(Mk. 10:45). The immediate context of this statement was an incident wherein Jesus’ disciples had an argument over James and John’s request to sit at the right and left sides of Jesus in the Kingdom of God. Jesus took the occasion to teach his disciples about power, authority, and servant-hood (cf. Mk.10:42-44).

In contrast to people’s prevailing way of life, Jesus saw genuine service to people as the primary purpose of power and authority. In other words, leaders are there not to lord it over the people, but to serve them. The people are not supposed to be dominated and controlled by those at the top, but rather they are supposed to be loved and served. It is this great concern of Jesus for people that transformed the old way of life in relation to power and authority. Jesus proclaims that power structures and systems must always serve the people.

Matthew has a different way of expressing the same mission of Jesus in his writings. He writes that Jesus came not to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets, but to make them come true (cf. Mt.5:17). In what way Jesus made them come true?

Jesus' statement should be understood in relation to other texts in Matthew that would give a picture of the religious situation not only during Matthew's time but also of Jesus' time. Matthew 12:11-12 on the Sabbath Law and Matthew 23:23 on Jesus attacks against the Scribes and the Pharisees would show us how the Law of Moses had been seriously circumvented to suit the interests of the religious and political powers at the time. Certain aspects of the Law that are beneficial to them, at least economically like offerings and sacrifices, are emphasized at the expense of the weightier aspects like justice, mercy and honesty.

Ritualistic laws, like the Law of the Sabbath, are given priority over laws that require deep human concern. This would be the case if laws were enacted, interpreted, and implemented devoid of serious considerations of its particular human and social context. Certainly, the law would become oppressive. And the ones who would be mostly affected would be those at the bottom of the social pyramid (cf. Mt.23:4).

Vis-à-vis a false way of life in relation to the Law, Jesus presents a new way of life. He teaches that the human person is more important than the Law; that the Law is made for the human and not the other way around (cf. Mt. 12:11-12). Hence, the Law would be valid only in so far as it would serve the human, in so far as it would bring justice, mercy, and honesty. It would become invalid and demonic if and when the powerful would use them to harass, exploit, and dominate other people, especially the poor. By pointing to this true spirit by which laws are supposed to be formulated and implemented, Jesus makes the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets come true.

Luke, for his part, writes that Jesus' mission reflects that of Prophet Isaiah (cf. Isa. 61:1-2). He says that Jesus' mission is *"to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has when the Lord will save his people"* (Lk.4:18-19). Luke describes the specific target group of Jesus' mission and ministry - the poor, captives, blind, oppressed – the dehumanized and marginalized sectors of society. Jesus' concern according to Luke is not just humanity in general, but rather that sector of humanity that suffers most from poverty and want. His concern for the poor and oppressed contradicts the idea that poverty and oppression are "divine dispositions".

Many believe during Jesus' time that the poor are poor because of their own sins. In other words, their poverty would show that God is punishing them for their own inequities, that it is God's will that they are poor. This kind of false consciousness, however, is debunked by Jesus' life and message as presented by Luke and even by the other disciples. Jesus cured the sick, forgave the sinners, fed the hungry, and brought hope and empowerment to the poor with God's Spirit upon him (cf. Lk. 4:18).

John's Gospel adds more meaning to Luke's presentation when he says that Jesus came not to steal, kill, and destroy, like other shepherds do, but to give life "in all its fullness" (cf. Jn.10:10). This statement, of course, should be viewed in terms of Israel's history wherein leaders betray the people's trust by exploiting, maltreating, and leading them to destruction. Life for Jesus, as John understood it, is to be shared. For it would be in caring for and sharing one's life to others that life itself would find meaning and fulfillment (cf. Jn. 6:51;15:13). This is the truth for which Jesus came to live on and to speak about (cf. Jn.18:37).

Although varied in their presentations about Jesus' life and mission relative to their own particular contexts, the Gospel writers are one in affirming the truth that the human is indeed central in this new consciousness about the Kingdom of God. From these mission statements, two important implications could be derived.

First, that Jesus' consciousness of the Kingdom transcends the national consciousness of the popular messianic movements at the time by pointing to the basic foundation of any movement for change: the concern for the human. Most noted of these messianic movements is that of the Zealots, who reduced their messianic hope into a political program. For them the establishment of God's Kingdom would mean freedom from Roman rule and the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom.

It is interesting to note that unlike the Scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus has no harsh words for the Zealots. Perhaps, there is truth in what others say that some of Jesus' disciples had really Zealot connections, or that Jesus' himself was influenced by the Zealots. In any case, the fact still remains that Jesus' consciousness of the Kingdom goes far beyond the narrow nationalism of the Zealots. The Zealots must have objected Jesus' behavior in relation to the Samaritans. For Jesus, poverty, injustice and oppression could not be eliminated without going into the very roots of the problem: the disintegrations of human relationships among people.

Jesus' concern for the human, therefore, goes beyond racial, religious, and even national boundaries. It is universal. Such universality also implies recognition of the universality of the human predicament. The problem of the Israelites is not just national, but rather international as well. In other words, the poverty in Palestine could not be fully understood and responded to adequately apart from the imperialist structure of the whole Roman Empire.

That is why we could not reduce the Kingdom of God into a kingdom of this world. The Kingdom of God must always judge the kingdom of this world in terms of how far it has served the human. For the concern for the human has been and remains to be at the center of God's reign. Without this awareness the consciousness of the Zealots would indeed be self-defeating.

Another important implication of the mission statements is that Jesus talks more of what the people should be rather than what they are. He says in these statements that the people should be redeemed, freed, cure, and given light and life to the fullest, but he does not give any abstract definition of people. He seems to be saying that the meaning of people should be sought within the context where people's lives are concretely experienced. He seems to assume that people know that they are indeed central in God's creation. But then, even the concept of the "image of God" in the Old Testament has to be understood in the light of the people's experiences in exile.

The same thing is true with the Kingdom of God. Jesus offers no abstract definition of the Kingdom. Instead, he uses the language of metaphors, similes, prophetic utterances, and parables. He tries to teach what God's reign is like, but not what it is. He seems to be convinced that it is only when people confront God's reign in their own historical context that they would realize for themselves what it really is. In any case, the serious concern for what happened to people and the possibilities of what should be done in relation to the eternal virtues of justice, mercy, and honesty is clearly shown throughout Jesus' life and ministry.

Another important element that should be emphasized in the concern for the human is compassion. It is compassion that moved Jesus to heal the sick (cf. Mk.1:41; Mt.14:14, 20:34) and the brokenhearted (cf. Lk.7:13), to feed the hungry (cf. Mk.8:12) and to bring hope to those in distressed (cf. Mt. 9:36; Mk. 6:34). It is compassion that impelled the Good Samaritan to help the victims of the robbers (cf. Lk. 10:33), the loving Father to accept his lost Son (cf. Lk. 15:20). Indeed, compassion is Jesus' response to human suffering. Compassion is the key element in the Good News of Jesus Christ and in the way he lived and communicated the Good News.

Compassion in Jesus' life and ministry is not simply pity. It is deeper than that. It is that which freed the self from self-concern and self-seeking in order to respond to others in need. It is that which moved a person to deny himself, to carry his cross, and follow the path of servant-hood (cf. Lk. 9:23). Jesus' compassion is never directed to the self or to those at the top. It has been directed always to the poor, the needy and the suffering with the sole purpose of bringing a new life. It is, indeed, a response to the victims of society.

## **B. To Be Truly Human –**

The human is traditionally understood as the exact opposite of the divine: the divine is good, the human is bad; the divine is strong, the human is weak. And the divine is more important than the human. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why some could not accept church people's involvement in human rights issues. They might be wondering why in the world church people involved themselves in mundane issues and not confine their involvement to what is strictly considered divine.

It is interesting to note, however, that today's theological trends focus substantially on the meaning and significance of the human. This is partly due to the fact that there is so much dehumanization in our world today. And thus, we wonder how human civilization could ever survive. I agree with other people's observation that the source of lawlessness in our country today is not the lack of respect for the law, but rather the lack of respect for human life. We seem to be losing our capacity as a people to be truly human. And thus, the primary theological issue today is on how human beings can be truly human. For it is in becoming truly human that we can be truly divine.

I do believe that the coming of God in Jesus Christ is meant to show to us what it means to be truly human.

Genesis 1:26-31 affirms the faith that the human is created in God's image. We have to go back to the experiences of the Israelites exiled in Babylon in 586 BCE (Before the Common Era) to understand this affirmation. The rulers of ancient empires and kingdoms, like Babylon, would claim themselves as the only image of God on earth whom people should bow down in complete obedience. But the Genesis writer proclaims the faith that each person, not only the ruler, is created in God's image.

To be created in God's image constitutes what it means to be truly human. It would mean in the first place that God bestowed to the human the power and the right to think, to reflect, to analyze and make decisions. The Israelites in exile were denied of this right. As captives of the Babylonians, they lost their self-respect, and therefore their sense

of being human (cf. Lam. 5). Hence, the Genesis writer's faith is both a challenge as well as a call for the restoration of the people's self-respect.

To affirm the Genesis writer's faith is to assert resolutely our right to self-determination. This would mean that we should be the one to decide what kind of society we want, what kind of social order and structures we should establish and follow. If and when we are denied of this right, we are also denied our true humanity.

Moreover, to be created in God's image and be human is to image God the Creator, to show God's will and purpose for humanity. Prophet Micah clearly stated God's will when he said, *"What the Lord requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God"* (Micah 6:8). To be human, therefore, is to do just that: to do justice, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.

To image God is not to usurp the position of God or to play like a god. Such would rather make us less human. Israel's experience under powerful empires bears witness to this fact. Ancient beliefs and practices would say that the ruler is supposed to be "God's image" on earth, but instead of imaging God the ruler lord it over the people. A religious cult is built around him, forcing people to worship him. Those who refuse would suffer punishment (cf. Dan. 3,6).

To play like a god would bring untold sufferings to many. For instance, the Early Church suffered so much as a result of a demonic display of power under Emperor Nero (cf. Rev.13). Jesus himself was a victim of those who thought and acted like gods (cf. Jn.19; Lk. 23). Reports of crimes each day are fresh reminders of what it means to play like a god. Playing like a god would indeed reduce a human person into a cruel "beast" (cf. Dan.7; Rev. 13).

Furthermore, to be created in God's image and be human is to be God's good and responsible steward. The human person is given the responsibility to see to it that God's creation is developed to serve the human community, and not to satisfy human greed. Stewardship should be understood in the light of our relationship with our fellow human beings. Every human person is God's steward. In fact, we don't really own anything in this world, not even our lives. We owe everything to God who created us.

And so, we find human fulfillment as we exercise our responsibilities as God's stewards. We become less human if we are deprived of such divine responsibility. Many peasants have died for asserting their rights to be stewards of the land; many indigenous peoples have sacrificed their lives in protecting their ancestral lands from foreign incursions. Indeed, everyone should share in responsible stewardship of God's creation.

It is interesting to note that the Genesis story does not include human beings among those that the human should subdue and dominate. For in God's plan, the human is not someone we should dominate and exploit, but someone we should care for and respect as fellow steward of God.

Finally, to be created in God's image and be human would also mean that the human is created with dignity. It is in the context of a community that such dignity is experienced, enhanced and preserved. The human is not born alone; he is born into a community. This is shown in our being created as man and woman (Gen.1:27). It is in our relationship with one another that our humanity finds meaning and fulfillment.

However, it is also in the context of relationship that the dignity of the human is trampled upon. The Israelites' painful experiences as slaves of foreign powers show us how the human could be reduced into a property that could be sold or destroyed.

It is in and through Jesus' life and ministry that we realize what it means to be truly human as creatures in God's image.

### **C. Identification With Humanity**

God becoming human in Jesus Christ affirms God's identification with humanity's sufferings and hopes. It reveals to us the God who said to Moses, *"I have seen the afflictions of my people, I have heard their cries, and therefore I have come down to deliver them from their slave drivers"* (Ex. 3:7).

The God we believe in is not a blind God, but rather a God who can see people in their afflictions. We could not hide from the all-knowing eyes of the Living God. The Psalmist declares, *"Where could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence? If I went up to heaven you would be there; if I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there"* (Ps.139:7-8). Indeed, we could not escape from the all-searching eyes of the Living God.

God, however, looks at realities very differently. While we often look at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Oftentimes, we can only see things around us, but God can see people. God sees not the outward beauty of things, but rather the inward beauty of a heart of compassion for a suffering people. God sees people in their afflictions, for it is right there where the truth could be found.

To see the afflictions of people is the beginning of God's mission in the world. For it is in seeing that we are involved with the reality of people around us. Seeing people's afflictions generates compassion. When Jesus Christ our Lord saw the City of Jerusalem, he wept over it; and he spent his life in proclaiming God's Reign that would bring about a new Jerusalem, "a new heaven and a new earth" (Lk. 19:41; Rev. 21). When the Good Samaritan saw the victim of robbers on the road to Jericho, his heart was filled with compassion; and he did something to save the victim's life (Lk.10:30-37).

We have eyes to see, but oftentimes we cannot see or refuse to see people in their afflictions. Through Prophet Isaiah God said to the people of Israel, "*See and see, but you do not perceived*" (Is. 6:9). We cannot see our people's afflictions, because oftentimes we only see them as mere statistics or abstract categories. We only see them as potential members of the church, as "sinners" to be evangelized and converted to our own church. We only see them as potential taxpayers or as potential voters to be fooled around and manipulated during election time.

We cannot see people's afflictions, perhaps because we think, "they are rich pretending to be poor." And sometimes people's afflictions are so common, so widespread and massive that we seem to think that this is just a natural reality of life. The sin of the Richman in the story of the Richman and Lazarus is not the fact that he was rich, but rather the fact that he did not see the afflictions of the poor man Lazarus right there in front of his door (cf. Lk. 19). He probably thought that Lazarus was just a mere fixture of his social environment.

We don't want to see people's afflictions, because oftentimes it is painful and disturbing. Sometimes, it would even make our lives more difficult and dangerous. It would force us to get involved. Hence, it is a lot easier, safer, and more comfortable to have eyes, but cannot see. We rather hide behind our masks than to open our eyes and to see people's afflictions. But then, in so doing, we are also departing from our God-given task of doing God's mission in the world.

To see people in their afflictions is a gift of God. It is a gift that characterizes the very nature of God as a missionary God. Hence, to see people in their afflictions is to manifest in our lives the kind of God we believe in and in whom we have put our ultimate trust and obedience. To see people's afflictions is to live a godly life.

Moreover, the God we believe in is also a God who listens to people's cry, who knows our sufferings. The Psalmist says, "*The LORD hears my weeping. The LORD listens to my cry for help, and will answer my prayer*" (Ps. 6:8-9).

The cry of the Israelites in Egypt is basically a cry for freedom from slavery. To be enslaved is to be treated not as a human being but as a commodity at the disposal of the owner. When the Pharaoh ordered the harsh treatment of the Israelites and the killing of their male babies, he was not thinking of human beings who would suffer (cf. Ex. 1); he was thinking only of the security of his empire as well as his power and authority, which were threatened already by the growing number of Israelites.

Indeed, when rulers think only of themselves, their own power and authority, and do everything they could to cling to them, they would consequently become deaf to people's cry and become blind to people's sufferings. Their hearts would be hardened and would be incapable of genuine compassion. In the words of Prophet Isaiah, they "*hear and hear, but do not understand*" (Is.6:10; Mt.13:14-15).

We must have to remind ourselves always that the moment we stop listening to our people's cry, time would come soon when we would also stop listening to our God. Listening to people's cry is God's gift for us. Listening is the very nature of God. Hence, God's presence is felt and known when we listen to people's cry.

When the Israelites suffered in the hands of the Babylonians, for instance, Prophet Jeremiah cried to the Lord saying, "*Why have you abandoned us so long? Will you ever remember us again?*"(cf. Lam. 5:20). Truly, it is in listening to our people's cry that the people themselves would know that our God is indeed alive. The LORD said to Moses, "*I have heard their cry*" (Ex. 3:7).

Hence, listening to our people's cry is the starting point of our mission in the world. To know our people's sufferings is to know the reasons for their sufferings. This would mean getting into the root causes of their afflictions.

Listening to people's cry is not simply listening to what people are saying, but more importantly listening to what people are not saying or are not allowed to say either because of fear or repression. This is listening to what is deep in the souls of a people, their fears and hopes, their genuine aspirations. Listening is not an easy task at all. It is easier and far more comfortable "to turn the stones into bread" (cf. Mt.4) and feed the people than to really listen to their cry. For listening does not only require enough patience; it does necessarily require enough courage.

Furthermore, the God we believe in is a God who comes down and be with the people in their sufferings and struggles. It is one thing to see the afflictions of people and to hear their cries, but it is also another thing to really come down and to be with them in their struggles.

The God of Exodus is not a neutral God, but rather a God who identifies with the suffering people. It is not because the Israelites are obedient and righteous. As a matter of fact, they are a rebellious people, always murmuring against God and against the servant of God (cf. Ex.16). The only reason for such divine sympathy is that God is gracious, indeed, to those who suffer, and that He truly understands their suffering.

The God of liberation of Exodus is the God who became human in Christ Jesus our Lord, who *“always had the nature of God, but did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will, he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a man and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death – his death on the cross”* (Phil.2:6-8).

In the Parable of the Final Judgment, the Son of Man would say to those before His throne, *“What you have done to the least of my brothers (and sisters), you have done it unto me”* (Mt. 25:40). It is significant to note that God in Christ Jesus identifies himself with the “least” of God’s people, and that such identification would be the measure by which we are measured.

In the story of Apostle Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, he heard a voice saying, *“Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?”* Then, Saul asked, *“Who are you, Lord?”* And then, the voice answered, *“I am Jesus, whom you persecute”* (cf. Acts 9). It is also important to pinpoint in this story that God in Christ Jesus identifies with those who are persecuted.

Hence, a church that affirms the God of Exodus, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, must also come down and be with the people in their sufferings and struggles. Like our God, we cannot do effectively God’s mission in the world by staying on a pedestal, by being detached from people’s realities. As a matter of fact, we cannot truly hear people’s cry and know their sufferings if we do not come down.

To come down is to do away with our messianic and triumphal attitudes towards people, our self-righteous and even condescending attitude towards people in their sufferings. Even our God have to come down in Christ Jesus our Lord in order to become effective savior of the world. As instruments of God’s mission in the world, we cannot do less than what God in Christ Jesus has done.

To come down would also mean to stop looking at the realities of this world from our own perspective, and like our God we have to start looking at the realities of this world from the perspective of our suffering and struggling people. There was a time in the history of the church when she thought of herself as the “mother and teacher” (*mater et magistra*) of the world. According to this view, the church has the monopoly of truth, and therefore the church should “teach” the world.

However, the church has painfully realized that she has also her own limitations, that the church in herself is not that perfect, although she has been trying very hard to be perfect, following Christ’s injunctions (cf. Mt. 5:48). Hence, we have to come down and humbly acknowledge that we have such limitations, and that we need to learn from our people like what our God has done in seeing people’s sufferings and listening to their cries.

Our God is far greater and bigger than the church. He is the God of the whole universe, the Maker of heaven and earth (cf. Gen.1-2). The reality of God permeates the whole creation (cf. Isa. 40). The Spirit of God moves upon the face of the earth (cf. Gen. 1:2).

To come down, therefore, is to humbly acknowledge that we, Christian believers, are not the only instruments of God’s mission in the world. In the writing of Prophet Isaiah, the LORD said to Cyrus the Great, the King of Persia, *“I appoint you to help my servant Israel, the people that I have chosen. I have given you great honor even though you do not know me. I am the Lord; there is no other god. I will give you the strength you need, although you do not know me. I do this so that everyone from one end of the world to the other may know that I am the LORD and that there is no other god”* (Isa.45:4-6).

God works in wondrous ways, sometimes in ways we could not fully understand. God’s ways are not like our ways. God’s thoughts are not like our thoughts (cf. Isa.55:8). God, indeed, is absolutely free to do His own mission in the world. For instance, God had chosen even a pagan ruler like Cyrus the Great of Persia in order that His suffering people would experience genuine freedom.

Perhaps, this is something that many of us would find quite difficult to accept. But this is precisely the reason why we have not been able to develop a truly Filipino church, a church that takes seriously our Filipino culture and way of life. Perhaps, we thought that the Biblical God could not be found in the culture of the Filipino.

To come down, therefore, is to do God's mission in the world with a sense of humility and servant-hood. *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people"* (Mk.10:35).

### **SOVEREIGN LORD OF LIFE AND HISTORY**

We also affirm in our Statement of Faith that **God in Jesus Christ is the Lord of life and history**. Again, how do we understand this affirmation of faith? God's lordship of life and history is shown in the way God is working in the world. When Job suffered despite his innocence, he questioned God's sovereignty due to the prevalence of suffering and evil in this world. But then he realized later that God is not silent; God is actually working to overcome evil and suffering (cf. Job 38-42).

#### **A. Working God**

The Song of Mary called the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) pictures to us a God who is at work. And this shows the dignity of labor and God's judgment over human idleness. But more importantly, it also shows where God is at work and where we, too, who believe in a working God, should also be working. We do believe that God is still working even today. The Psalmist says that God "never slumbers or sleeps" (Ps.121:4).

We may differ in our understanding as to where God is presently at work. Some may say that God is at work in the wonders of creation. Others may think that God is at work in the church, in the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments. And still others may believe that God is at work in the preaching of the Word.

Mary's Song, however, would suggest some other ways of looking at God's work. First of all, God is shown at work in remembering the lowly (v.48). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was just an ordinary woman from an obscure town called *Nazareth*. Yet, in spite of that, she was chosen to be the bearer of the Messiah (Lk.1:26-33). Out of this lowly woman's womb, there the Savior of humankind was formed and nurtured. God truly remembers the lowly; and it is from among the lowly and not from among the proud, that our genuine salvation as a people comes.

Moreover, God is also shown at work in bringing down the mighty kings from their thrones and in lifting up the lowly (v.52). Mary declares in her song God's presence even in the struggle for power. She recognizes the fact that the mighty kings' hold on power is just temporary. It is not permanent. Perhaps, at present the mighty kings enjoy the comforts of their thrones. But certainly, there would come a time when they would be brought down from their thrones, and the lowly would be lifted up.

In any case, in this whole process, which is sometimes bloody, Mary believes God is there working. Power is God's good gift which is meant for service and not for self-aggrandizement (Mk.10:35-45).

God is also shown at work in sending the rich empty away and in feeding the hungry (v.53). It is not only in the struggle for power that God is present. Mary in her song proclaims that God is also present in the struggle for wealth. Mary had probably seen how the human desire for more and greater wealth corrupted the lives of the few and led the many to go hungry.

Wealth, however, is to be shared, so that the hungry would be fed. That is how God intended it to be (Lk.18:18-30). If wealth were not shared, time may come when it would be lost. God in surprising ways may take it away. For wealth belongs ultimately to God. Hence, it must be utilized according to God's will and purpose. And so, in this whole process of ensuring that everyone shares wealth, Mary believes that God is there at work.

Feeding the hungry is not simply distributing free food coupons to the poor. The poor are hungry not only of food but also of freedom and justice. That's why Jesus said to the Tempter, "Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks"(Mt. 4:4). The poor need freedom from poverty; they need economic justice to reign in our land. God's word is a word of freedom and justice. And so, those who believe in this kind of God should do something to make His word come true.

#### **B. The Power of Powerlessness -**

*"He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Isn't he the king of Israel? If he will come down from the cross now, we will believe in him! He trusts in God and claims to be God's Son. Well, then, let us see if God wants to save him now!"*(Mt. 27:42-43). These are the words of the chief priests, the teachers of the Law or Scribes, and the elders in Jerusalem, as they made fun of Jesus dying on the cross. These are words of hypocrisy, of mockery, of unbelief and hatred. This is their response to the crucifixion of Jesus.

The chief priests, teachers of the Law, and elders are the religious leaders of Jesus' time. According to the Gospels, the religious leaders are the ones who plotted to kill Jesus in collaboration with the Roman authorities (Mt. 26:3-4). They misuse people's power by inciting the people to demand for Jesus' death by crucifixion (Mt. 27:20).

We might be wondering why in the world the religious leaders respond to Jesus' crucifixion in this manner. Why they hate Jesus so much to the point that they even work out for his execution. Even by just having a cursory reading of the Gospel story, we would find that the religious leaders perceive Jesus as a very dangerous person. They regard him as public enemy number one.

Jesus is seen as a dangerous threat to the Jewish religion and society as a whole. He is viewed as a blasphemer and usurper of God, because he forgives sinners (Mt. 9:1-8). He is seen as a violator of Jewish law, because he cures the sick on a Sabbath day (Mt. 12: 9-12). He has caught the ire of the religious leaders, because he calls them hypocrites and tells them that while they are paying their tithes, yet they are not observing the more important aspects of the Law, which is justice, honesty, and mercy (Mt. 23:23). He is perceived as disturber of peace, because he drives away the money-changers in the Temple and accuses them of making the house of God a hideout of thieves (Mt. 21:13).

Obviously, the religious leaders of Jesus' time have become so legalistic and moralistic to the point that they would even put to death a suspected innocent person, and yet they would think that they are doing this in the service of God. Indeed, how many people killed in the name of religion? How many people victimized, simply because religion has become a religion of law, and not a religion of love?

When Jesus was asked about the most important commandment, he did not mention the Ten Commandments at all, but rather he pointed to the Love Commandment: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as you love yourself"* (Mk. 12: 29-31).

For Jesus, fulfilling the Ten Commandments without love is incomplete. That's why the Rich Young Ruler, who claimed that he already fulfilled the Ten Commandments, Jesus says, *"You still lack one thing. Go and sell everything that you have. Give it to the poor. Come and follow me"* (Lk. 18:22). Apostle Paul is right when he says, *"I may have all the faith needed to move mountains – but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned – but if I have no love, this does me no good"* (1 Cor. 13:2).

And so, let us try to examine the words of the religious leaders in response to Jesus' crucifixion. Generally, their words would show to us how different their point of views from that of Jesus.

First of all, for the religious leaders, to save oneself is the most important thing in life; but for Jesus, to save others is the very purpose of life.

The religious leaders say, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself!" (v.42). But Jesus says, "He who saves his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt. 10: 39).

For Jesus, the purpose of life is not to live for our selves, but to live for others. All the great men and women in history are considered great not because they live their lives selfishly for their own selves, but because they give up their lives in the service of other people; they spend their lives not for their own salvation, but for the salvation of other people. This is what Jesus would like to teach to the people of his day through his life and ministry.

Secondly, for the religious leaders, to be a king is to conquer by force and to lord it over other people; but for Jesus, to be a king is to serve or even to give one's life for the sake of the people.

The religious leaders said, "Isn't he the king of Israel? If he will come down from the cross now, we will believe in him!" (v.42). I'm sure it's not only the religious leaders who had this kind of sentiment. Even the disciples themselves were actually expecting Jesus to lead the people in their fight against the Romans.

But Jesus said, *"You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all"* (Mk. 10: 42-44).

Essentially, the words of the religious leaders are like the words of the Devil when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Mt. 4: 1-11). The Devil said to Jesus, *"If you are God's Son, throw yourself down...(and) not even your feet will be hurt on the stones."* But Jesus answered, *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

And thirdly, for the religious leaders, to trust God and be a Son of God is to be exempted from suffering; but for Jesus to trust God and be a Son of God would also mean suffering.

The religious leaders said, "He trusts in God and claims to be God's Son. Well, then, let us see if God wants to save him now!" (v.43). But Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10: 45).

To be faithful to God does not exempt us from suffering. The Story of Job in the Old Testament would illustrate to us this point. Job was a very righteous person; he was a very faithful servant of God. Yet, he experienced



unspeakable suffering; he lost everything he had in life, including his health. But nevertheless, he remained faithful to God to the very end, until God restored to him everything that he had lost in life. Through all his experiences, Job realized that suffering is very much part of our faithfulness to God. We should not think that if we are faithful to God, then it is all bed of roses. Faithfulness to God would also mean suffering.

The suffering of the righteous is a vicarious suffering; it is a suffering for the sake of others. This kind of suffering is a suffering that redeems; it is a suffering that saves. It is like the suffering of a mother, who works day and night to provide a brighter future for her children. It is like the suffering of a father who denies himself with all the amenities in life in order to earn a living for his family. It is like the suffering of a missionary who crosses rivers and mountain ranges in order to bring God's Word to people in the hinterlands. It is like the suffering of media people who are killed in cold blood for exposing the truth.

The suffering of Jesus on the cross is a vicarious suffering. It is the consequence of the life he lived. If Jesus did not give his life in the service of the people; if he did not cure the sick, forgave the sinners, fed the hungry, gave good news to the poor; perhaps, he would not have been accused of being a blasphemer and disturber of peace; he would not have been crucified.

But, on the other hand, if Jesus did not do all these things, perhaps, he would not have been our redeemer; he would not have shown to us the way to the Father.

However, the cross is not the end; death is not the end. For on the third day, God has raised Jesus from the dead. By raising him from death, God has given His stamp of approval on Jesus' life. God has vindicated Jesus' life. By raising Jesus from the dead, God is saying to us that Jesus' life should be the life that we should live; this is the kind of life that redeems the world.

The religious leaders, who plotted Jesus' death, are in the end proven wrong. Their hypocrisy, unbelief, and hatred are exposed. Jesus is not after all a criminal as they accused him to be; instead, he is the savior of the world.

And so Jesus, indeed, appears to be powerless in the eyes of the religious leaders. His death on the cross for them is a sign of defeat. But then, there is power in the powerlessness of Jesus. By being powerless in the eyes of the world, Jesus is able to conquer the power of sin and death. By dying on the cross and being raised from death to life, Jesus is able to remove the terror of the cross and to make the cross a symbol of love and redemption. This is how God in Jesus Christ has shown sovereign lordship: by putting meaning, purpose and direction to life and history.

## **The Holy Spirit: The Presence of God in the World**

**Ruth Panganiban-Billena**

*We believe in one God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,  
who provides order, purpose, meaning and fulfillment to all creations;  
That in Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary, God became human  
and is Sovereign Lord of life and history;  
That in the Holy Spirit, God is present in the world,  
empowering and guiding believers to understand and live out their faith in Jesus Christ.*

### **Introduction**

Whatever happens to the great Apostles' Creed? The creed still mirrors the fervor of the faith of our foreparents in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Creed still carries the deep sense of certitude about the reality of the Triune God. The Creed shall continue to reflect the faith journey of those who have gone before us. The Creed shall forever be considered a historic testament to a collective expression of faith experience.

It is now the turn of the UCCP to mirror her passion for a God-directed, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, Biblically-based, and community-oriented statement of faith. The creed, we hope, shall be translated into deeds.

### **The Deity of the Holy Spirit**

To talk about the deity of the Holy Spirit is to touch on the Trinity. The Bible did not mention the word Trinity but clearly points to the existence of the Triune God. Of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit seems to be the least talked and preached about. While distinct by herself, the Holy Spirit finds her purpose and ministry in union with the other two members of the Godhead.

In Greek, the Holy Spirit has a neuter gender. The English translation rendered the Holy Spirit, masculine. In Hebrew, the Holy Spirit is feminine and therefore will be referred to as She in this article.

### **The Holy Spirit and God, the Creator**

Who is the Holy Spirit or the Holy Ghost? The Holy Ghost is an Anglo-Saxon word which means *breath* or *spirit*. The Bible did not bother to prove the existence of the Holy Spirit. It assumes that the Holy Spirit exists. In fact, the Bible emphatically says that the Holy Spirit co-existed with God, the Creator and God, the Redeemer even before creation.

And we believe what the Bible says!

In the Bible, the attributes assigned to God are also ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Genesis 1:2 declares the all-powerful (omnipotence) attribute of the Spirit: *And the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.* The Psalmist writes of the omnipresence attribute of God: *Where could I go from your Spirit? Or where could I go from Your presence? If I ascend unto heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there!* (Ps. 139:7) St. Paul testifies to the all-powerful (omnipotence) attribute of the Holy Spirit: *The Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what we know are things that our spirit teaches us. Even so, no one knows the things of God, except the Spirit of God (I Cor. 2: 10-11).*

Another creation passage commonly used to refer to the presence of the Holy Spirit is Genesis 1:26a. It reads: Let us create humanity in our image, after our likeness. The term used here is *Elohim*, the plural form of God, but is linked to a singular verb. The conventional interpretation of the lay is that the *us* refers to the triune God: God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The number—the *us*, according to the original text, speaks not so much of plurality but of intensity. As the creating ministry of God continues, as articulated in the essay of Lope Robin, the work of the Holy Spirit, with God the Creator, goes on as well. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

### **The Holy Spirit and God, the Redeemer**

From creation, we shall now trace the deity and work of the Holy Spirit in salvation – in close partnership with the Christ, the Redeemer. Without a doubt, one of the most awe-inspiring passages in Scripture relates to the work of the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis salvation: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy Offspring shall be called the Son of God (Lk.1: 35).* This was the message of angel Gabriel to Mary. Mel Aoanan uses the same passage in his article on the place of Mary in the UCCP statement of faith. How this happened is a mystery—but it did happen! The power of the Holy Spirit transcended the normal physiological chain of birth, for nothing is impossible with God.

From Bethlehem, the Holy Spirit's work centered around Jesus the Christ: led by the Spirit (Lk.4: 1), anointed by the Spirit (Lk. 4:18, Acts 10:38) empowered by the Spirit (Mt. 12:27-28), offered himself as an atonement by the Spirit (Rom.8: 11) and gave commandments by the Spirit (Acts 1:2).

The presence of the Holy Spirit was highlighted in the New Testament during the baptism of Jesus. On that great event, the Holy Spirit was placed on equal footing with God the Creator and God the Redeemer when She was presented in the form of a descending dove.

While it is true that the work of the Holy Spirit was concentrated on God, the Son, Jesus, in the same vein, affirmed the ministry of the Holy Spirit to him and his disciples. Jesus spoke of the *now* and the *then* dimensions of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus announces: *The Holy Spirit abides in you (Jn.14: 17). He admonished Nicodemus: Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (Jn.3: 5).* In the Great Commission, Jesus declares: *...baptize all everywhere in the name of the Creator, the Christ and the Comforter.*

On the other hand, Jesus promised to His disciples that when He departs, He would send them another *Paraclete*, which literally means *called to the side of*. The Paraclete, otherwise known as Comforter/Counselor, represents both divine presence and guidance for the disciples. We believe that the Third Person, the Holy Spirit is God and is present in the world.

### **The Ministries of the Holy Spirit**

The origins of the word *spirit* in Hebrew, *ruah* and Greek *pneuma* are similar. Both stem from associations with breath and wind.

The Gospel according to John refers to the Holy Spirit as breath (Jn. 20:22). The Book of Acts of the Apostles, which should really be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, describes the coming of the Holy Spirit like the coming of the strong wind. The same Book characterizes the dawning of the Holy Spirit through the tongues of fire and continues to chronicle the empowering ministry of the Third Person in the Trinity.

The unlearned and simple fisherfolk were able to speak in different languages. The Jews and Gentiles alike were all filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is no respecter of persons.

We may not be able to speak in different languages but it does not mean that the Holy Spirit is not at work in us. Neither does it mean that we are not filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables the church to do what she was called to do namely, *to go and make disciples of all nations and baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, teaching them all that Jesus has commanded them.*

### **The Fountain of Empowering Gifts**

The empowering gift of the Holy Spirit is not limited to speaking in tongues. The gifts are listed in separate accounts in the letters of Paul: Romans 12:6-18; I Corinthians 12:8-10; 12:28-30). The various gifts may be grouped under three general headings: 1). the gift of utterance (teaching, speaking in tongues, ability to interpret speaking in tongues and prophecy), 2). the gift of apostleship (pastoral care, working miracles and ministry of the word) and 3). the gift of practical ministry (caring for the needy, serving, encouraging, contributing, performing acts of mercy, and giving aid)

Those gifts are endowed and or granted that the church may stand together as God's royal priesthood and earthly family (Bishop Camba's article on the Significance of Church). The gifts are designed to bring the reign (kingdom) of God here and now. The gifts are to build the Body of Christ and are exercised for the common good of the believers.

The Holy Spirit has empowered the early Church that she was able to stand the tests of time. The same Holy Spirit is able to make the *United Church of Christ in the Philippines* the very church that God meant her to be.

### **Guiding us to live up our faith in Jesus Christ**

Paul identifies the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ with the Holy Spirit (Romans 8) and linked the unity of the Trinity to the unity of the Body of Christ. The unity of the three Persons continues to provide a framework in living up our faith in Jesus the Christ, namely, the unity framework.

Because our access to God is through one Spirit (Eph. 2:18) and we are led by one Spirit (Rom. 8:14), it does not really matter whether we are of Presbyterian descent or Congregationalist by orientation. What counts is our desire—our commitment to concretize our ministry that the world may believe that we are of Christ. Again, the article of Bishop Camba on the *Church, the Household of God* mentions the role of the Holy Spirit in the unity of the church.

Dr. Everett Mendoza, in his article, *An Introduction to the Doctrine of Salvation in the UCCP*, discusses two views of salvation. It is a fact that some of us spouse the evangelical view of salvation. Others advocate the liberal view. Our differences in perspective allow us to sense with greater vigor the presence of the Spirit that moves us toward each other recognizing that we need each other. We complement and complete each other. The Holy Spirit guides us to live out our faith by celebrating unity in diversity.

**The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world!**

### **Sustaining ministry**

In the foregoing discussion, we have seen the Holy Spirit with the God, the Creator breathing in life in the whole of creation. Likewise, the Holy Spirit works were traced hand in hand with Christ the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit's specific area of ministry that of empowering God's people, comforting believers during trying moments and guiding the believers in their faith journey were given space.

Our Statement of Faith calls the Holy Spirit Sustainer. Indeed, the Holy Spirit sustains us even as we respond to the call in our quest for a dynamic and meaningful relationship with the divine. The Holy Spirit illuminates our hearts as we read the Scriptures and try to understand what God is telling us during these challenging times. She enlightens us as we search the Scriptures that our knowledge may be fired with zeal and action. John Mackay, former President of Princeton Seminary once said: *Reflection without commitment is the paralysis of all action.*

The Holy Spirit helps the believers understand the Bible and apply the message to their lives. Noriel Capulong touches on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Scriptures in his commentary on the Bible.

### **Conclusion**

The music in our liturgy affirms the presence of the triune God. We sing *Glory be to the Creator (Father), and to the Christ (Son) and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen*

Our prayer for the Holy Spirit to come has long been answered. God's spirit is here and now with her strength and her power. God's Spirit is here and now in Her own gentle way. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

## **Jesus Christ: God's Majestic Work of Judgment and Grace**

**Levi V. Oracion**

### **What is Christology?**

There are five Bible passages that define what Christology is for the faithful of the UCCP: the first is the introduction to the Prologue of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1: 1). The second is the famous John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Thirdly, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," (2 Cor. 5: 19) and the fourth is, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him." (Col. 1: 15-16) The fifth is the kenotic passage in Philippians, which counsels, "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied the Godself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:6-8) Doubtless, there are many other New Testament passages that we can bring in to these powerful revelatory declarations.

### **God as Grace in Creation**

God's work of grace began with creation itself (Lope Robin) for God is the God of love and grace who could not rest until God could share the joy, fulfillment and power of life with God. And therefore God created the universe and peopled it with human beings, creatures made in God's own image. God took a great risk in creating creatures in the divine image when God invested them with freedom so radical that it countenanced the freedom to oppose God's own very being and will. Adam and Eve engaged in a radical act of freedom and dared to actualize their God-given possibilities (Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro) and succumbed to the temptation of breaking away from the authority of God.

God went into action immediately and searched for God's objects of love. God came in love, yet the divine righteousness could not be ignored. The demands of God's righteousness must be served. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, and from then on they had to fend for themselves, and take care of their own

security through their own acts of freedom. Thus begins the setting of the story of God and human beings in the Bible.

### **The Strange Visage of Grace after the Fall**

It is clear that this story is shrouded in myth but imbedded in it are vast cosmic forces that have gone astray. God had to summon the powers in the depths of the divine love and grace to bring back God's creation to Godself. In creating human beings gifted with freedom, a gift that could propel them to fellowship with God, God has put the divine self in the vortex of a seismic power that threatens to put an evil surd in God's entire creation. And so, when the Bible becomes historical God plunges Godself into the cauldron of human sinfulness and explodes with revolutionary power. The Exodus is the intrusion of God in human affairs fraught with human pride, love of power and hypocrisy where a powerful few lords it over many others and throws them into oppression and misery. As the God of righteousness, God identifies Godself with the exploited and the oppressed, takes up their cause and lures and empowers them to struggle for their dignity, freedom and rights. (Exodus 2: 24-25; 3: 7-10) Thus begins the story of God in God's struggle with God's chosen people in the Bible.

### **The Divine-Human Synergy**

God, in God's righteousness and love, does not merely seek to liberate and empower the poor and the oppressed but seeks to transform them as a people that would reflect God's character and will. So God calls the people of the Exodus God's chosen people, a holy nation who would be the bearer of God's light to the nations, and undertakes to transform them to reflect the divine character and will even as God continued to wrestle with evil principalities in giving care and protection to the chosen people. But the story of God's people is a story both about their struggle against their political enemies, as well as with their own intransigence as creatures obsessed with their own security and pride. They kept moving from one extreme to another in their relationship with God—from faith to unfaith, from obedience to disobedience, from humility to pride and hypocrisy before God—and manifested with amazing ingenuity in transmogrifying the majesty of God's grace into instruments of their quest for security and pride.

In God's supreme and majestic efforts to make them into God's people, God dared to bring forth what is truly and essentially divine within God that carried with it the expulsive power of God to banish sin, hypocrisy and pride from God's people and transform them into children of God. Hence, we see in the Bible that the divine process of redemption is so intimately intertwined with the process of God's self-revelation moving as it does from revealing the divine self as both transcendent over and immanent in human history, to God's consuming anger over sin that belies God's unfathomable love for the people, to various rehearsals of synergistic action between the human and the divine, all the way to the shocking emergence of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53) as the primary bearer of divine grace and love until finally it irrupted into the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **God with Us: The Incarnation**

The person of Jesus is deeply rooted in the history of God's struggle to redeem and transform God's people. The Gospels report Jesus has so steeped himself in what God has revealed of Godself so much so that he was able to realize himself as the most authentic articulation of divine righteousness and grace within the structures of humanity. Born of Mary, Jesus lived perfectly by the meaning and power of God's kingdom within the ranks of broken humanity so much so that those around him perceived him as God garbed in the habiliments of humanity that is enshrined in Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16: 16) The divine becoming human, eternity entering into time, God daring to be with us and one of us injects a whole new dimension of possibilities to our humanity. Since God's incarnation is essentially expressed in terms of God's solidarity with the wretched of the earth, it therefore introduces a powerful revolutionary force for truth and justice in human history. Jesus' temptation by the Devil set forth both the direction and essence of his ministry that in time began to shake the foundations of the world in which he lived. Thus Jesus is the theonomous human being, the man who knew he was grounded in the being of God, and the human being who so beautifully revealed God in his word, act and being.

It is thus that Jesus taught with unquestionable authority and could dare to put himself above the law. (Mark 2: 23-30) And it is no wonder that he could perform astounding miracles wherein even the forces of nature obeyed his word and bent to his willing, (Mark 4: 35-41) and even the dead rose at his command. Demons trembled at his approach, and fled at the sound of his voice. (Mark 5: 1-20) Thus for John the Baptist, who declared the imminent arrival of the promised Messiah, the joyful question, "Are you the Messiah who is to come?" could not be repressed. The divine was incarnate in Jesus, and those who knew him acknowledged him as their Lord and Savior, and the power for authentic human life in history. (John 20: 28; Matt. 20: 34; Mark 5: 25-34; Matt. 16: 15-16; Acts 4: 13)

## **The Irruption of Jesus in History**

Jesus entered human history that was a microcosm of the human passion for security and ingenuity for transmogrifying God's embodiments of grace into expression of human decadence and depravity. The people of Israel, under the dominion of Rome sought to struggle against Roman power by a dogged and robust if vainglorious attempt to be the holy people of God in the belief that God in God's own good time would come to liberate Israel if it were faithful to God. Jesus perceived the strategy of the Jewish establishment of his time, typified by the Scribes and the Pharisees in the Gospels, as a proud yet pitiable attempt to ensconce themselves in the security offered by the Torah and the Temple. Such outlook could only intensify the mutual antagonism between Rome and the people of Israel and could only lead to the destruction of the Temple and the people of Israel. (Luke 19: 42-44) To counteract that dominant ideology, Jesus offered a return to the ethic of *imitatio Dei*, to be perfect like the heavenly Father (Matt. 5: 48). It means a serious and honest practice of humanity and compassion to all of God's people, particularly to the most helpless and insignificant of God's creatures created in God's image. It was not Jesus' intention to crush the Scribes and the Pharisees and demolish the religion around the Torah and the Temple. Rather, he strove hard to lure them back to the original genius of the Jewish faith — the love of God and to make such love to spill over into the love of one's fellow human beings. But the Jewish religious leaders understood Jesus' criticism of the religio-political establishment and of their ideology and his practice of compassion as subversive of their power and authority. They strove hard to eliminate him.

Jesus' ministry is a revelation of the radical contradiction between the way and being of this world and the way and being of the kingdom of God which Jesus embodied in his person and work and proclaimed in his preaching. But this is not a battle to the death wherein the cause Jesus took up sought to eliminate and destroy the other completely. Rather, the cause of Jesus was the cause of the human, that human beings may enjoy their full humanity and be restored to full fellowship with God. The work of Jesus was therefore both a work of liberation, redemption and transformation. It is a work of liberation, and therefore Jesus has to conquer the principalities and powers of this world (Rom. 8: 2-3). It is a work of redemption, and therefore, Jesus has to save people from the clutches of the evil one at the cost of the sacrifice of his own life (Rom. 5: 9). It is a work of transformation, and therefore Jesus infuses them with his own righteousness that they may have both the courage and power to move in the direction of God's kingdom (Rom. 12: 2).

## **The Crucifixion**

Jesus' last days were a tragic and despicable story of betrayal, mockery, physical and psychological torture, a mock judicial process and brutal crucifixion. Jesus stood hard by God righteousness, truth and love to the very end as he pitted his word, act and being to the injustice, pride and hypocrisy of his tormentors and executioners. As Jesus was going through the throes of death, his last words were of forgiveness for those who crucified him, words of tenderness and love to his mother, words of utter solidarity with broken and miserable human beings, of deep satisfaction over mission accomplished, and of trust to God to the providence and wisdom of God. Jesus died by crucifixion —which is an articulation of the essence of man's depravity which in simple terms is the human act of murdering God. (Matt. 26-27: 1-54; Mark 15; Luke 22: 47-23; John 18-19) The cross of Christ performs a double function in the process of liberation and redemption. The cross symbolizes the radicality of human depravity and evil for it dramatizes the human act of eliminating God altogether from his/her life and world so that human beings can be absolutely on its own. The cross, therefore pronounces the unutterable divine judgment on humanity as a whole and exposes its utter evil and depravity. On the other hand, the cross symbolizes the unfathomable grace and love of God because it declares that "God so loved that world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3: 16)

## **The Resurrection**

Jesus rose from the grave in three days, and the news of his resurrection came to his disciples as an explosion of the triumph of the cause of Jesus and revealed him as who he really was—the Messiah from God, the Lord and Savior of all humankind. With the resurrection of Jesus, the underlying spiritual power of historical life was unveiled which is none other than the radical openness of the life of the human reality to God (the form of Jesus' life), the passion with which that life exemplifies Jesus' passion for embodying the love of God, for the pursuit of truth and justice (the dynamics of Jesus' life) and his resoluteness in luring God's people towards the kingdom of God (the thrust of Jesus' ministry). Such is the matrix and substance of the spiritual realities in which we live which is underlying power in human history. And that spiritual reality becomes an active force when the disciples of Christ render radical obedience to him.

The disciples of Jesus saw that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto the Godself, and thus he is hailed as the very expression of God's unfathomable grace to human beings depraved as they are. In Christ, God's grace cannot be trifled with because it is thoroughly embedded in God's righteousness, and therefore it comes as a radical attack upon human sinning, demanding repentance, humility and faith as a condition for its acceptance. Thus, the cross of Christ as it reveals the majesty of God's grace is at the same time a revelation of the total depravity of human beings that is responsible for the miserable condition of human beings. The cross of Christ has the power to save because behind it is the holy, righteous and loving God who suffered so much in exposing the evil and death character of sin and breaking its stranglehold over the human heart, and within it is the powerful reaching out of the love of God to the sinner as it lures one to a life of love, righteousness, courage and power with God. (Rom. 5: 18-21)

Jesus revealed that the power and grace of God forms the fundamental reality that underlies human existence. It is by that grace and power that human beings may truly live, move and have their being, and to swim and float in that grace and power all we have to do is to believe.

### **The Power and the Courage to Be**

Paul exclaims that those who believe in Christ "are more than conquerors," (Rom. 8: 37-39) and therefore a powerful force in history for justice, truth, freedom and for authentic humanity. For in Christ, God has lodged in human history the power to withstand the principalities and powers of this world. In the incarnation, God entered human history, and the divine presence remains a potential power that is waiting to irrupt every time a human person casts one's lot with the oppressed and takes up their cause of truth, freedom and justice. God entered human history when a whole community realizes their helplessness and opens itself to divine action for deliverance as testified to in Philippine history in EDSA Uno and EDSA Dos.

Thus, faith in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Lord endows anyone the power to achieve authentic humanity — to be humble, gracious, kind, open, loving before God and others. An authentic human is ready to respond to Jesus' call to be in solidarity with the oppressed of this world, and at the same time, to have the courage and power to be in Christ. Thus, one gains the courage to be God's instrument in fighting against the presence of evil in all its forms in society, against falsehood, injustice, hypocrisy, greed in their various forms and guises. It means the courage to fight the pride and greed of nations or entities within nations, international forces such as the drive of powerful nations to imperialism, or the tendency of the rich and the powerful in society to lord it over others. Thus, one may become God's vanguard for the creation of truly human societies that move towards the kingdom of God.

## **Affirming Mary's Place in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

**Muriel Orevilla-Montenegro**

### **WE BELIEVE**

That in Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary, God became human and is Sovereign Lord of Life and history."

### **Mary in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

Mary appears in the statement of faith of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines but only in a very short phrase. Mariology is an articulation of the understanding of the church regarding the place of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Christian tradition. However, like most Protestant churches of the Reformed Tradition, UCP does not give Mary a prominent place in the teachings. Protestant Christians have relegated Mary to the periphery, except during Christmas where she becomes visible in the crèche or sometimes in a pantomime during the Lenten season. But, does she deserve a space in the statement of faith? Yes, she does. She is not only indispensable in the christological story; she challenges Christians to take seriously one's faith in God in the midst of humanity's

struggle for dignity and survival. It is important therefore, to take a closer look at Mary. One must understand that giving her a space in the articulation of our faith is not Mariolatry.

### **Who is this Mary? A Brief Gaze at Tradition**

One cannot deny that the image of Mary is ubiquitous in Filipino life, culture, and spirituality. The Philippines is predominantly a Roman Catholic country, and many people know Mary by many names – the Blessed Virgin Mary or *María Santísima*, our Lady of Immaculate Conception, the “*Birhen Purísima*,” Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of Perpetual Help, *Birhen sa Baranggay*, or simply “Mama Mary.” One can see her image in calendar posters, her icons in buses, in yard grottos, in altars in the homes, and even in commercial spaces.

The Filipinos inherited these images from the missionaries that came with the European conquistadores. The Iberian invaders offered salvation to the natives – be it in the Philippines or in Central and South Americas - who were deemed to be on the road to perdition by showing the “light of the cross and the affection of the Virgin.”<sup>1</sup> Conquering new territories for the glory of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were parallel with their enterprise of salvation. These invaders considered Mary as their protector. In this sense, the Mary of the Western Christian tradition, like the colonial Christ was made complicit in the violent colonial religious projects, in the destruction of native cultures and in genocide conducted in the name of Christian truth.<sup>2</sup> In colonized places in other parts of the world, there are evidences that when the natives were converted to Christianity – whether under duress or not – they could not totally leave behind the mother goddess, the feminine image of the divine that they experienced in their indigenous spiritualities.<sup>3</sup> In Mary, this longing to be in touch with the feminine image of the divine is met. Thus, on the one hand, native converts to the colonial religion found in Mary an inspiration for waging resistance against the colonial rule and patriarchy. On the other hand, the powerful and patriarchal men, including the *políticos* in contemporary times, have appropriated the image of Mary for their interests and self-serving projects. As it is observed in the Philippine context, the Filipino traditional politicians – women and men - display their devotion to Mary especially during election times to win the votes of people, many of them being devotees of Mary.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 136.

### **The Appropriation of Mary in Patriarchal Theology**

One need not be surprised that a patriarchal Christian tradition puts Mary up in a pedestal, and yet, ensures the subordination of women to men. A Roman Catholic and world renowned feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that this kind of Mariology has a primary function in patriarchal theology, that is: “to primarily reflect and express the ideology of the patriarchal feminine.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Mary turns into a virgin mother and becomes a “theological personification”<sup>5</sup> of the subservient female who demolishes the image of the inquisitive, autonomous, and risk-taking Eve.

The creation of the patriarchal feminine in the Christian tradition began with the discourse of the church fathers in the midst of christological debate in the early period of the development of Christianity. This is particularly evident in the attempt of the early church leaders to prove that Christ was not only fully divine; that Christ was also fully human in reference to Jesus of Nazareth. In order to do this, the church fathers must argue that Jesus was born of Mary, a human being. Reformers like John Calvin<sup>6</sup> followed the thinking of the church fathers such as Gregory of Naziansus,<sup>7</sup> and lifted up Mary’s humanity to support the idea that Christ became truly human. Yet, also following Augustine, John Calvin and Martin Luther held on to the concept that women are inferior and are mere “reflection of man.” In order to emphasize Mary’s dissimilarity from any other woman, they highlighted her sexual virginity. On the surface, this process of spiritualizing Mary seemed to rescue her from the prevailing Greek view of ancient times that woman is merely a defective copy of the “true” norm of humanity - man.

Yet, in spiritualizing Mary, the reformation theologians disconnected Mary from her song, the *Magnificat* in the Lukan account and divested her of her capacity for spiritual discernment. Furthermore, Mary was constructed to become a ghostly figure – an individual denied of her sexed body and sexuality, and of her capacity to be fully human. Somewhere else, I have written that this move has reduced Mary to a mythical virgin baby-maker, a spiritualized womb-for-rent. Consequently, the church fathers and reformers succeeded in exercising power over the woman who sang the *Magnificat* by constructing and elevating a mystified, spiritualized Mary. The churches then proceeded to present this fragile and docile Mary as a model for Christian women. In effect, through catechism and



socialization of women believers with this spiritualized Mary, the fathers of the church succeeded in disempowering women from becoming subjects of their own lives.<sup>8</sup>

If the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church has domesticated Mary to control the women, the Protestant tradition disempowered and oppressed women by removing Mary from its rituals, hymns, and discourse. Indeed, US-based Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung correctly observed that the patriarchal church used Mary against Asian women by inventing negative mariologies to justify women's subordination to men.<sup>9</sup> The Protestant churches even succeeded in making its members develop an "allergy" to Mary by subtle ways of associating her image with the Roman Catholic tradition – as the "other". It is not surprising to find Protestant women and men who detest Mary because of the idea that she "belongs" to the Roman Catholic church. Certainly, the Protestant church takes pride in being rooted in the Bible, but it has removed Mary from its life and from the consciousness of its members. In Protestantism, Mary is "useful" only for the Nativity scene during the Christmas pageant. In UCCP, a sermon based on the life and message of Mary is very rare. This process of silencing Mary provides a theological underpinning for the silencing of women in the church.<sup>10</sup> It behooves, therefore, for well-meaning Christians to go back to the Bible and re-discover the rich legacy that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had left for us to reclaim.

### Reclaiming Mary of the Gospels as a Commitment for Transformation

A Bible-reading Christian encounters Mary in the pages of what is regarded as sacred text. The gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke tell us about the birth story of Jesus, obviously using sources outside of the account of Mark, the earliest gospel written. Mary is the young girl betrothed to an older man named Joseph. She became pregnant even before she got married, and the gospel writers tell us that an angel assuaged Mary's discomfort about her condition by telling her that it is God's will that the Holy Spirit makes her pregnant. The evangelists tell us that Mary accepted

---

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. XX-XXI, *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book I, xv.4.

<sup>7</sup> Naziansus is part of what we now know as modern Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, "Re-thinking Incarnation: An Asian Women's Perspective," *Silliman Journal*, Vol, 47, No. 1 (January to June 2006):18-34.

<sup>9</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

her fate readily, even as Joseph attempted to reject her. She took the pains of going through a journey and a difficult situation of giving birth in a place away from home – whether it was in a manger as the gospel of Luke tells us, or in a house according to Matthew's account, or in a cave in Bethlehem, according to scholars. With Joseph, Mary had to flee to Egypt to keep her son Jesus safe from the madness of King Herod. Mary kept in her heart the prophecy that her child's destiny will pierce her heart. In Luke's account, Mary went through an experience of exasperation looking for a son who got lost for three days, only to be struck by the words of a son who seemed to have no concern for his mother's feelings. Yet, in another instance, in the Johannine account, Mary appeared to be a strong woman who initiated her son into his ministry by urging him to perform a miracle during a wedding in Cana. At the end of the gospel account, we find Mary following her son all the way to the foot of the cross. She was one with the disciples who gathered in Jerusalem after her son's death.<sup>11</sup>

These fragments of accounts put together have been accepted by the Bible-reading Christian without question. Presentations of the nativity scene of the Christmas pageant hardly stir up believers to ask questions. However, a mature believer ought to study the Bible with new pair of eyes and open hearts to deepen one's understanding of the tradition enshrined in the sacred text, and to make sense of one's faith intelligibly. This requires a liberating hermeneutical approach, an interpretation that unshackles the believer from narrow-mindedness and literalism. This is crucial in looking at Mary from the feminist perspective because feminist theologizing is at once a theological and political commitment to women and to changes that women desire for themselves and for the world, without romanticizing "women." Thus, interrogating the text and the prevailing traditional theological presuppositions is very important in feminist theologizing. This requires *problematizing* the text in light of the values of compassion, justice, peace and meaningful life-in-relation with fellow beings, or, should I say, fellow earthlings and the Earth. Yet sometimes, even literary critic Paul Ricoeur's *hermeneutics of suspicion* that creates a "critical distance between text and interpreter"<sup>12</sup> would not even be adequate. At times, we need an approach that I call the *hermeneutics of disbelief*, a stance that says, "I cannot believe this text! This is not life-giving, not life-affirming, and not life-sustaining!" Such stance, I think, will empower women to probe deep into the text, take courage to speak out, and

refuse to simply swallow the androcentric or male-centered texts and interpretations that instill ideas and beliefs contrary to the values of justice, peace, compassion, and abundant life-in-relation.

In this light, it is necessary to re-read the story of Mary with the culture of ancient Palestine as its backdrop. In doing so, we get a glimpse of the situation of Mary's world. In ancient Middle Eastern tradition, girls beginning with age twelve were already prepared for arranged marriage, a practice that is not too different from modern Middle Eastern and many Asian cultures even at present times. Mary was still a child, and she was thrown into a situation that was, in contemporary Filipino standard, not fitting for a girl-child. Yet, the Bible also gives us a clue that Mary kept all the things that happened to her in her heart, *in silence*. In problematizing Mary's story, one may ask: Could it be that Mary's right as a child was violated? Was there possibly a case of child sexual abuse in Mary's story? At a time when artificial insemination or test-tube babies were yet unknown, pregnancy without sexual contact is impossible. Indeed, the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Children were not promulgated yet in Mary's time. We need to remember that in chapter seven of the book of Isaiah, the writer used the Hebrew word *almah* that means a young woman of marriageable age. This word referred to the young pregnant wife of King Ahaz (732-725 B.C.E.). In the process of translation, the Hebrew word *almah* was rendered into *parthenos*, a Greek word that refers to a woman who never had a sexual intercourse. This rendition was carried over and enshrined in the New Testament by the writer of the gospel according to Matthew. What was the politics behind the Matthean rendering of the Hebrew word *almah* into the Greek *parthenos*? What does it mean to say, Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit? The Bible uses metaphorical language; then, what does the discourse on "virginity" mean? Is it limited to an imperforated hymen? The girl-child Mary is presented in the Bible as the image of obedience *par excellence*, the exact opposite and nemesis of the "disobedient" Eve. But was not Mary's case a story of stealing a child's innocence?

These questions and more, demand intelligible answers so that one can explicate a biblical interpretation that is intellectually sensible, and spiritually enriching. While some theologians would probably have standard answers for the above questions, the reader must explore the questions seriously and reflect on Mary's case. What will be the impact of Mary in our daily lives as Christians? The challenge of re-reading and re-interpreting Mary's story, especially from women's experiences and perspectives, would be crucial in cultivating a deep reflection on one's faith in the midst of people's struggle for dignity and survival.

---

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:26-56; 2:1-35, 39-51; 8:19-21; Matt. 1:18-25; 2:1-23; 12:46-50; 13:53-58; Mark 3:31-35; 6:1-6; John 2:1-12, 19:25-27; Acts 1:14.

<sup>12</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 4.

### **Mary as a Model of Discipleship**

Reading Mary as a child who has experienced the harsh realities of a patriarchal society and a foreign-dominated world will make a difference in textual interpretation. This will allow us, the reader of the text, to see her as one who emerged with a powerful reflection through her song, the *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-55 from such context. This song articulates her vision of a radical change in society, one where the oppressive system is turned upside down, and power relations are reversed. Mary knew poverty as a peasant girl. She knew the painful burden of being violated at such a young age. Instead of turning away from God, Mary bravely pronounced her faith in a God who brings down the oppressor and lifts up the oppressed. This is the kind of obedience and spirituality that Mary has modeled for us. It is the spirituality that seeks to transform the system that perpetuates the inequality of the distribution of wealth, of consumerism that destroys the earth, of arms trade and warfare, of international relations that makes poor even poorer, of poverty that made people susceptible to diseases, and of patriarchy that inflicts violence against women and children. This is the Marian spirituality that Christians need to emulate. This Mary is one who knew pain, and yet her love for her son and his cause made Mary bear her pain to comfort those who suffer and are hurting. If we look at Mary in this way, then we could be her companion in the journey towards discipleship. We are able to comfort and heal the pains of the people. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a Roman Catholic biblical scholar, is right: Mary "holds out the offer of untold possibilities for a different Christology and theology."<sup>13</sup>

Mary's life story is familiar to many Asian women who bear the triple burden of patriarchy – of being a daughter of a father, a wife of a husband, the mother of a son.<sup>14</sup> This experience of triple burden helps women make a distinction between Mary the singer of *Magnificat* and Mary the spiritual woman in traditional Western mariology. The classical Roman model of Mariology is used by romantic feminism to put forward the view that women are "*less fallen than men*"<sup>15</sup> – that women are more capable of caring, loving, sacrifice, altruistic, and less sinful. Consequently, it perpetuates the fancy view of Mary as the humble handmaid of God, the virgin mother, mother of God, the symbol of domesticated women, or the "spouse of the Holy Spirit." On the contrary, Christians should go

back to the biblical Mary and relate to her as the compassionate mother who accompanies her struggling children. One must be suspicious of manipulations of the devotion of Mary of Nazareth<sup>16</sup> and examine how her life impacts ours as we seek to find a meaningful expression of our faith. The late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador is known to have said that the true homage a Christian can pay to Mary is to become like her and “make the effort to incarnate the life of God in the trials of our transitory history.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the image of Mary that prevails today is far from the peasant girl-child Mary who rose above all odds and turned into a resilient woman, Mary the mother of Jesus. Most Filipinos today prefers to look at a Mary who is severed from her *Magnificat*, one who is compassionate but is docile. She wears an extravagant robe, and wears a crown at times. She resides in cathedrals, and in grottos of affluent homes. The Mary who appears in calendar posters and in many iconographies is far from the Mary that one meets in the Bible. This image of the “patriarchal feminine” invented by church hierarchies gives rise to a theology that hides and suppresses the power of femaleness and nature.<sup>18</sup> The construction of a “patriarchal feminine” is an attempt to suppress and even erase the liberating memory of the girl-child Mary of the occupied territory of Nazareth. The memory of her *Magnificat* is revolutionary. It is a “dangerous memory” because it challenges not only the “mariological fantasy and cultural femininity,”<sup>19</sup> but it also confronts the corruptions and greed of the powerful. Indeed, the “patriarchal feminine” image of Mary is contrary to the figure of the young pregnant girl who understood the message of God at a time when she, along with her people, struggled “against victimization and for survival and dignity.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it not surprising that ordinary people in other parts of the globe find more meaning in meeting a Mary who is stripped of the patriarchal trappings,<sup>21</sup> one who sings with them their version of *Magnificat*. Mary is indeed a great example of a faithful disciple of Jesus.

---

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1995), 187.

<sup>14</sup> Chung, 74-75.

<sup>15</sup> Ruether, 104-05.

<sup>16</sup> Gebara and Bingemer, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Gebara and Bingemer, 136.

<sup>18</sup> Ruether, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 98-100.

## Mary's Rightful Place in the Statement of Faith

In the early pages of this commentary, Levi Oracion explains why it is important for UCCP to have a statement of faith. As an account or *apologia* of our faith in God, he proffers that a “statement of faith reminds us that we belong to the story of God’s people that begun way back in biblical times.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he explains, this statement provides us the symbols, language and handles of our faith so that we are able to make sense of our existence as human beings and earthlings at the same time. It helps us ask and answer the basic but profound questions: who am I? where do I come from? where am I going? In other words, this statement of faith helps us find meaning as we relate with our own selves, with other earthlings and with the earth.

Mary shows us the meaning of a life lived to praise God. As the mother of Jesus, she has demonstrated through her life and her *Magnificat* that a true disciple is one who works for the realization of the *kingdom*<sup>23</sup> that Jesus preached and lived out. Mary embodied the values of justice and peace of God. This Marian spirituality and theology is crucial in cultivating the kind of discipleship that Jesus demands of his followers. In presenting his idea of discipleship, the writer of the Johannine gospel points to Mary, the mother of Jesus, to be at *par* with the Beloved disciple as they “stood at the foot of the cross as models for Jesus’ ‘own,’ his true family of disciples.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, a well-developed articulation of the place of Mary in the teachings of the church can be a strong basis for taking up the cause of equality of women and men not only in society but especially in the church, particularly on the matter of ordination, and in the case of other Christian churches, the matter of priesthood.<sup>25</sup> It is high time for the Protestant church, specifically the United Church of Christ in the Philippines to recognize the place of Mary in the story of our faith, for indeed, without her, the story of God’s salvific act in the life of Jesus the Christ will not be complete. ☺

## References

- Balasuriya, Tissa. *Mary and Human Liberation: the story and the text*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1997.
- Brown, Raymond E. *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

- Brown, Robert McAfee. *Theology in a New Key*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Vol.XX-XXI, *Library of Christian Classics*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990.
- Gebara, Ivone and Maria Clara Bingemer. *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987.
- Orevillo-Montenegro, Muriel. "Re-thinking Incarnation: An Asian Women's Perspective," *Silliman Journal*, Vol, 47, No. 1 (January to June 2006):18-34.
- Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1995.

---

<sup>22</sup> This word "kindom" is used in the feminist circle to point out the inclusive character of the reign of God that Jesus introduced in his teachings.

<sup>23</sup> See Levi V. Oracion, "Why A Statement of Faith."

## An Introduction to the Doctrine of Salvation in the UCCP

Everett L. Mendoza

### Introduction

Underlying the current debate on the doctrine of salvation are two lines of understanding, both of which have deep roots in the biblical and historical traditions of churches that constitute the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. The two lines do not necessarily result in the categorization of members into one type of Christian or the other. But its appreciation is a helpful **tool** in fostering a robust and vibrant unity through dialogue and in avoiding polarization and conflict within the fellowship. The two lines have divergent ethical emphases but may converge at certain points to an extent that their respective theological impetus may not be distinguishable.

The *evangelical* line proceeds from the Pauline understanding of salvation as justification, or the forgiveness of sins, and sanctification as growth in Christian perfection. There developed within the evangelical view of salvation a drift towards fundamentalism through the pull of later generations of American mission workers. On the other end, the *liberal* line takes off from the ministry of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels. In the '70s, the liberal theological view adopted some of the basic features of liberation theology via the Protestant ecumenical movement and the Roman Catholic Church. It is correct to say that the already existing tensions between the evangelical and liberal lines have been exacerbated by the influence of two contemporary theological paradigms at opposite poles — fundamentalism and liberation theology.

### An Evangelical View of Salvation

Evangelical theology came about as a *critique* of Medieval Catholic theology undertaken by the 16th century Protestant Reformers. The doctrine of salvation “by grace alone through faith alone” is a *reiteration* of Paul’s view, which was meant to expose a perceived error in Catholic theology that logically and historically led to the sale of indulgences and other practices that tended to diminish the role of God’s grace. Luther also discovered a new understanding of “justification” from the Greek edition of the New Testament compiled by Erasmus. Calvin’s humanist background might have influenced his firm belief in the human possibility of gradual sanctification. In Methodist theology, pious devotion to the Lord may lead to the realization of a truly sanctified life on earth.

### **Justification: God’s Unconditional Forgiveness**

The UCCP has inherited from the Protestant tradition, a doctrine of salvation that has two aspects. Firstly, salvation means *justification*, meaning the remission of sins through God’s unconditional forgiveness, which is received through faith in Christ alone. The sinner is then reconciled to God and so *regarded righteous* by God even if *essentially* the person continues to be subject to sin. Luther calls a Christian (and the church!) *simul justus et peccatur*, “righteous and sinner at the same time.” This means to say that, henceforth instead of an angry God, now the sinner has a merciful and forgiving God. Salvation refers to a *new relationship* that God has established with sinners. It is a relationship of a forgiving God and a sinner that sincerely asks for God’s forgiveness.

### **Sanctification: Renewal towards Perfection**

The second aspect of salvation is *sanctification*. Without the second aspect, it would seem that the Christian doctrine of salvation is entirely contingent on the health of that relationship and therefore provides no assurance of continuity. But in addition, the effect of God’s forgiveness is that the believer is *grafted* into the life of Christ by which the sinful self is renewed and matures towards perfection. There happens an exchange or intercommunication of properties between Christ’s sanctified humanity and the believer. In Christ, or being bound to Christ, the believer participates in Christ’s power over sin and receives the confidence to use it in the struggle of the Spirit against the flesh that continues to rage even in the new life. A new will and a new spirit now possess those who abide in Christ. In this sense alone may a Christian declare that those whom Christ has won from the powers of evil will not be lost.

The new life grows in holiness through the praxis of devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ. As the Letter to the Ephesians says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (1:10). God’s law as it is revealed in Scripture as well as in human reason and conscience is the schoolteacher that guides the faithful in the path of obedience. The faithful obeys God’s law not in order to merit God’s forgiveness (justification) but to train the body and soul in the discipline of the new life.

### **Salvation is Manifest in the New Relationship with God**

The notion of salvation as an assurance of life in heaven after death may be considered a reward or a result of salvation rather than essential to the definition of salvation. The Apostle Paul’s seeming indifference to death and be with Christ in glory or to remain alive on earth and be with his friends indicates a view of salvation that is not defined by a trip to heaven. He didn’t have to say that the righteous ones (justified and sanctified) would be taken up to God in glory, or that the unrepentant sinner would end up being cut off from God and thrown to hell because the two are the necessary effects of one’s relationship with God. Being saved is like a wedding sponsor who is assured of a place of honor at the wedding banquet although going to the banquet is not the reason for standing as a wedding sponsor. It is the *new relationship* that matters, banquet or no banquet.

Hence, instead of emphasizing the trip to heaven, an evangelical doctrine of salvation ought to focus on the “what” and the “how” of salvation. This means a *Christian praxis of humility, repentance and gratefulness to God, of being forgiving and charitable to one another and moral purity in personal conduct*. This kind of praxis is a response to God’s saving grace rather than a means to obtain it. Those who live otherwise actually reject God’s grace and have no reason to claim a place in heaven.

A genuine experience of justification gives the Christian conscience a *tremendous sense of personal freedom from guilt and fear of God’s wrath, which empower one to venture into all ethical options*, including radical political action, as an expression of gratitude and obedience to God. It is this sense of freedom that emboldens Christians to stand up against oppressive totalitarian regimes. Among the many examples of Christians who attained this sense of freedom to resist tyrannical regimes are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Christians in Nazi Germany.

### **A Liberal View of Salvation**

Liberal theology emerged from the ruins of Protestant Orthodoxy, seeking to make the Christian faith once again a lively option in the mind of modern intellectuals. It constructed bridges that could connect the archaic forms of the

gospel and modern thought and culture. Liberal theologians recast the Reformation doctrine of salvation in ways that would address the spiritual as well as social problems of modern times.

Two trends diverged from the original liberal impulse. One, a *philosophical* reading of the spiritual culture obtaining at the time, which reveals the nature of human sinfulness and a corresponding view of salvation based on a new exegesis of the Scriptures. Two, a *social* reading of the human situation leading to an understanding of sin in the structures of society, and a notion of salvation extracted from a new reading of the Scriptures. The common denominator is a commitment to present the gospel as a valid and viable solution to the most persistent and perplexing problems vexing humankind. This was a heroic effort of the church in the face of the challenge of secularization and philosophical atheism.

Inevitably, however, liberal theology undermined, if not rejected, old beliefs that appear contrary to science and human reason. Some of the most fundamental convictions in evangelical theology, such as the salvific effects of Christ's death, the actual reality of Jesus' resurrection and his return in glory came to be regarded with much skepticism. Also, Liberal theologians and scholars tended to look at the Bible more as an object of research rather than a book of eternal verities, which offended the Evangelicals no end. The disillusionment precipitated a break in Protestantism that led to a new theological formation called *Fundamentalism*.

### **Social and Material Dimensions of Salvation**

Liberal theology's social reading of the gospel brought Christians to the forefront of social reforms. Learning from a socialist critique of capitalism, the social gospel succeeded in mobilizing Protestant churches and seminaries, putting them in the mainstream of non-Marxist movements for social change, justice and peace. *In liberal theology, salvation is not only individual but also social, not only spiritual but also material, not only for life in eternity but also for life on earth. But the stress is on the latter.*

Liberal theology in North America was basically anti-communist. In fact, it espoused a social program that was resented as an alternative to the radical socialism of Marxism. It was in Latin America that Christian social activism engaged Marxism in a dialogue, which contributed to the birthing of *liberation theology*. In the UCCP the social aspect of salvation directly developed from liberal theology and only later, in the late '70s, did it absorb ideas from Latin American liberation theology. On the whole, social salvation as understood in the UCCP has retained liberal theology's non-Marxist stance but nevertheless continues to earn the mistrust, if not antagonism, of evangelical Christians with fundamentalist leanings.

Liberal theology has ethical consequences that resemble the ethics of evangelical theology. A genuine commitment to justice presupposes a belief in the inner goodness of each person and the social origin and causation of individual sinfulness. Those who seek human and social liberation as the central content of the gospel also recognize the imperatives of remolding the human self into the likeness of Christ. With this belief, *personal discipline and moral purity is considered an integral component of a social project.*

### **Two Understandings of Salvation, One Gospel**

The evangelical view of salvation, on the one hand, proclaims the gospel of God's forgiveness and the gift of a new life in Christ. It testifies to the effects of the gospel on the believer's life. The gospel is about the making of a new being – redeemed from sin and holy in God's eyes. This is the ultimate benefit of salvation promised by God through faith in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the liberal view of salvation proclaims the realization of God's reign on earth and the redemption of the whole of God's creation. Jesus gave us a foretaste of this day as he preached good news to the poor, healed the sick, drove out demons, gave sight to the blind, fed the hungry and comforted the weary and sorrowful. Working for a just, peaceful and prosperous society is our participation in the Lord's work of salvation for the whole world.

### **Conclusion**

These are two genuine and valid but distinct understandings of the gospel that, at the ethical plane, may actually dovetail into a common Christian praxis in the world. Both understandings are articulated in the UCCP's proclamation of the gospel, but sadly its members are being misled into pitting one against the other. The church is one household that has a Mary and a Martha, each one fulfilling different tasks and complementing each other in the one ministry of the Lord. Instead of confrontation, there ought to be mutual support; instead of suspiciousness, appreciation for the variety of gifts from the one Spirit; instead of conflict, cooperation; instead of debate, dialogue; instead of mistrust, charity.



# Looking at the Mirror: Do We Radiate God's Image??

Muriel Oreillo-Montenegro

*We believe*

*That persons are created in the image of God,  
with other persons and with all creation.*

*That by disobedience, they have become sinful  
but by grace through faith, they are redeemed  
in Jesus Christ,*

*That being entrusted with God's creation, they are called  
to participate in the establishment of a just and  
compassionate social order.*

## What do UCCP Members Need to Affirm?

As Christians, members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines subscribe to the UCCP Statement of Faith, a section of which says that human beings are created in God's image. What does this statement mean? What does it mean to affirm such statement?

First and foremost, I would like to make it clear that creeds or statements of faith are concise declarations of belief. Creeds were formulated as attempts of the believers to express their faith in simple language clear to their audience. Creeds emerged for the purpose of teaching in catechesis and for baptism in particular contexts. Creeds became important part of a Christian tradition that we inherited from our ancestors in the faith and the missionaries who introduced the Christian religion. We also need to remember that these creeds were expressed in a language shaped by a culture different from our Filipino culture. Thus, as products of particular contexts, creeds and theologies are not timeless truths. They are bound to be reformulated and re-interpreted so that they will be relevant to particular communities of faith who are located in a particular time and space. Anselm of Canterbury is right when he insisted that faith must seek understanding in the face of challenges – old and new. Rather than seeing creeds and doctrines as standards of right beliefs and tests of heresy, they must be seen as guideposts for right practice of the faith. In light of such view, I will make some critical comments on the UCCP Statement of Faith, particularly on the section that speaks about the human being. This I do in the hope that our declaration of faith will not only speak to the members of the UCCP and other Christians, but will also challenge them to reflect truly and meaningfully the image of God in every moment of their lives. Unless indicated otherwise, I use as reference the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) in this article.

## Human Beings: Created in God's Image

*That persons are created in the image of God . . .  
and destined to live in community with God,  
with other persons and with all creation.*

Human beings are earthlings, but these earthlings are created in God's image. This is clear in our Christian tradition that borrows from Judaism's narrative in the Hebrew Bible. The story writer said that after bringing forth all other creatures from the earth, God created humankind from soil (*ha adama*) and breathe life into it: "Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26a), male and female God created them (Gen. 1:26-27). Like anything and anyone else on earth, humankind is an earthling, though created in the image (*eikon* or *selem*) of God. The human being is an icon of God. This statement may sound odd, but the word "icon" is an Anglicized form of the Greek word *eikon*, which means "image" or "likeness" or "portrait". The word *eikon* carries over the meaning of the Hebrew word *selem*, which means "image," "likeness" or "resemblance",<sup>1</sup> in the New Testament. In the gospels, *eikon* is used as an "object to resemble the form or appearance of something"<sup>2</sup> (Matt. 22:20, Mk. 12:16,

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 853-854.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick William Danker et. Al., eds. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 281-282.



Lk. 20:24 *Greek New Testament*). The Pauline writings use the word *eikon* to refer to that which represents something else (I Cor. 11:7; 15:49; II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Paul's view of *eikon* is highly influenced by the concept of *selem* in Genesis 1:26a-27. The creation story in Genesis 1 provides the foundation for the understanding of humanity as created in God's image.

One commonality among religions is the belief that God, no matter what the name, created the universe and the earthlings. The Christian declaration that humanity is created in God's image is built upon the idea that we have some understanding of the mystery of what and who God is. The Judeo-Christian tradition tells us that our ancestors-in-faith experienced God in many ways and these experiences are expressed in a variety of metaphors. Although interpreters commonly described God as male, especially as Father, one only needs to read carefully the Bible to discover a variety of metaphors in picturing God.

There are gender-neutral images of God in the Bible such as "rock," "fortress," "refuge" and "light" to cite a few (Ps. 31:3; 94:22; Isa. 26:4; Ps. 27:1). The writers of the Bible also used different metaphors to illustrate the feminine images of God such as mother eagle, a woman-in-labor, a pregnant woman, a nursing mother, Lady Wisdom, a mother hen, and several others (Deut. 32:10-12, 18; Isa. 42:14; 49:15; 66:13; Prov. 8:1- 9:1-18; Matt. 23:37). These images of God emerged from human beings' experiences that shaped their understanding of God's nature. God is loving, just and merciful. God is the source of strength, justice, nurturance, tenderness, compassion, graciousness, creativity and radiance. There are God's characters that humanity ought to reflect in daily life as created in God's image. And yet, God is deeper and wider than all these descriptions. God is the great divine mystery that embraces us and all of life and the universe. God is the One Who Is, and Will Be.

Various religions and cultures view God in different ways. One image that religions commonly hold is that of God the Creator. Christians hold that in God's loving-kindness and grace, God created the human beings and equally endowed them with rights, dignity, and freedom (Prov. 22:2; Acts 10:34-36). God has given human beings the gift of spiritual discernment and the capacity to do what is right. Such gracious gift of sensitivity and freedom is possible because God's divine image is present in the human spirit, mind and will.

How do we reflect the image of God? As earthlings, human beings received from God the gift of power – of spiritual discernment and sensitivity, and the capacity and freedom to do what is right. Being created in God's image, earthlings are compelled to participate in God's power and creativity in cultivating life with all other earthlings, and make it flourish for all. A person who recognizes one's self as created in the image of God will act as a moral agent in transforming a decadent world, and built a just and peaceful world. Obedience to God, therefore, must be understood in light of the realization of God's image in us. Obedience to God means living a life that radiates the truth and beauty of the Divine.

### **Revisiting the Notion of Sin and Grace**

*That, by disobedience, they have become sinful,  
But by grace through faith  
They are redeemed in Jesus Christ.*

In real life, human beings have chosen to be disobedient and have refused to realize and radiate the beauty of image of God in them. The creation story that Christians claim together with the children of Abraham tells us that human beings are the late comers into the planet Earth. Yet, human beings are responsible for the greatest damage done to the Earth and its inhabitants. Human beings have chosen to abuse God's gift of power. They inflict violence on other created beings and consequently stained the pages of Earth's story with so much bloodshed and debauchery. Human beings chose to be arrogant and have even institutionalized their greed. They use anything on earth, especially reason, science and religion to justify their controlling genocidal and ecocidal projects such as colonization, pre-emptive wars, and ecological destruction. They build empires to exercise hegemony over other nations. They ignore the rights of other earthlings and of the Earth. Rather than realizing the image of God in them and appreciating the privilege given to them (Ps. 8:5-8), human beings refuse to acknowledge their being earthlings and aspire to become God instead.

### **The Development of the Concept of Sin in Theology**

Traditionally, theologians attributed human being's propensity to do evil to sin. They trace it to Genesis 3 that tells the story of disobedience. Here, the writer shows how human beings missed (*hata*) the right path towards a life in community with God. There is a long list of words associated with sin in the Hebrew Scriptures. Among these, the Hebrew concept of *hata* and its meaning has been carried over to the New Testament. *Hata* means to miss the goal of living an upright human life according to divine standards, or, to go wrong by departing from these standards.

Taking the Hebrew concept, sin may be interpreted as an act of rebellion against God, an act of disobedience. Sin is hubris, evident in human being's arrogant claims and actions as if they are God. In the New Testament, *hata* is associated with usage of the Greek word *hamartia*, which is translated as sin.

As years went by, Christian interpreters developed the concept of sin as a spiritual condition that human beings could never overcome except by God's grace. Following the Pauline tradition, Augustine of Hippo traced the origin of sin to Genesis 3 as the story of "the fall" that caused the distortion of the order of things. Augustine understood the intellect and will as superior over the flesh, which must be controlled. However, when the first human beings disobeyed God by eating the fruit of the tree, the intellect and will lost their control over the flesh. Lust and desire are expressions of distorted love that reside in the flesh. Theologians who follow this line of thinking have devalued the body as the location of sin (Rom. 7:18). These aspects of human passion, they assert, blemished the human will and intellect, as well as the body and sexuality (Romans 7:14-21). As a result, human beings passed on to their offspring these characteristic depravity and immorality. Thus, a person is born into the mess of what Augustine called the "original sin" (Rom. 5:12) and "death came through sin" (Rom. 5:13-14; 6:23).

A closer look at this view allows us to see that the writers and interpreters of Christianity's sacred texts have constructed sin as a spiritual force that controls and forces a person to do something against one's will. Holding on to this view traps us in a dualistic understanding that splits the human being into conflicting facets, and ignores the totality of the person. It separates the will/spirit against the body. We need to realize that the spiritual dimension of sin is manifest in concrete and bodily terms, be it in personal or in social levels. Thus, the view of sin that is confined to the spiritual dimension alone is inadequate. On the one hand, the spiritualized view of sin allows persons to make excuses to run away from their accountability to embody the image of God and evade the responsibilities of being moral agents. In effect, human beings imagine another world beyond the blue skies where life could be experienced fully. On the other hand, this view hinders human beings from facing the reality that natural death is an unavoidable aspect of human creatureliness; that earthlings must go back to the womb of the Earth. When human beings embrace natural death as part of a life lived long and fully, they will make every moment of life for everyone as beautiful as they can. This attitude could empower them to resist evil acts that bring unnatural death to humanity and to the Earth. Sin may be overcome by God's grace, yet such grace must be acknowledged and accepted with intentionality for one to resist sin and to transform the self and the world.

### **The Unspoken Dimension of Sin**

It certainly makes sense to define sin as pride and arrogance, as one could easily find evidences of these in church and society. Considering the economic and social dimension of sin, one could see the marginalization and oppression of the poor. Asian theologians referred to the oppressed peoples as the "sinned against."<sup>3</sup> Asian feminists see the abused and exploited women not only as the "sinned against" but also as the oppressed among the oppressed. Interpreters of the faith, who were mostly male, tread the path of pride and abuse of power by clinging to the ideology of patriarchy that enabled men to dominate and exploit women, especially economically disadvantaged women, throughout history. Such ideology molds women to be compliant agents and makes them believe that God's will is for them to live for men's well being at the expense of their own. There are some women, however, who embrace the patriarchal ethos and exploit other women and weaker men.

Sin has been associated with disobedience to God. In most women's experiences, the theological notion of disobedience has been used by patriarchal men to keep women "in their place" as servants of men. Patriarchal societies expect women to be subservient and not raise questions over unjust structures and relationships created by classism, racism, and ethnocentrism. Doing the contrary is disobedience. Yet, to women of color and the economically poor women, disobedience can be liberating in some situations. Disobedience may mean contesting oppressive norms and systems. It means destabilizing androcentrism, the notion that privileges the male-centered worldview. As a principle behind patriarchy, androcentrism sets the male person as the norm of humanity and defines women as "the other". Androcentrism is manifest in sexism, the attitude that assumes woman as inferior on the ground of her sex.<sup>4</sup> Women suffered violence because of their sex. Many women and girl-children experience various forms of sexual violence, including incest, rape, and harassment in the homes, in church and in society. Patriarchal society has inscribed self-contempt, low self-esteem and the feeling of unworthiness in women's

---

<sup>3</sup> Hope S. Antone, "Making Sense of Christ's Atonement," *In God's Image* Vol. 22, No. 4 (December 2003): 35-39. Raymond Fung was the first one who introduced the term "sinned against." See Raymond Fung, "Evangelism Today: The Sinners and the Sinned-Against," in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, Revised Edition, edited by Douglas J. Elwood (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 200-212.

<sup>4</sup> Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp, eds. *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography* (London and New York: Arnold, 1999), 5-6, 251.

consciousness. When Christians interpret and practice the faith in light of the patriarchal, androcentric and sexist views, they exercise violence against women. They abuse God's gift of power. When anyone vilifies the female person because of her sex and sexuality commits sin against the image of God. Thus, one should not overlook the patriarchal underpinnings in the construction of the notion of sin. As God created the human beings in the image of the Godself, human beings are, therefore, good. Humanity's task is to make that goodness flourish. Human beings' task is to attain self-hood, to realize fully this divine image and to use God's gift of knowledge and power in loving and mutual relationships towards the fullness of life. Failure to do so is sin. Sin is not only the "absence of love and compassion."<sup>5</sup> Sin is the refusal to practice love and compassion. This is manifest in the arrogance and hubris of human being, especially of men. Most women's sin is the timidity<sup>6</sup> and the refusal to speak up against sinful practices in church and society.

Set in a patriarchal context, the male author of Genesis 3 constructed the notion of disobedience by naming and blaming the female human being as the cause of the fall. The writer of the text said that she ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge and "also gave some to her husband . . . and he ate" (Gen. 3:6). We must revisit the interpretation of Genesis 3 in light of the understanding that God created human beings – male and female – in God's image. This demands re-reading the text from a different perspective.

### **A Feminist Re-reading Genesis 3**

There are different ways of interpreting a text. The traditional way of reading Genesis 3 follows the typological and allegorical approach. Augustine of Hippo and his followers consider it as the account of "the fall" or the "original sin." The writer of the text simply tells a story of the human beings eating the fruit of the tree. According to the account, God punished the earthlings and expelled them from the garden of Eden. As punishment, the serpent must crawl on its belly; woman will suffer labor pains in childbirth, and be ruled-over by man. On his part, man must till the land.

On the one hand, many questions we are afraid to ask must be faced squarely. Did not the writer of Genesis 1 tell us that God "saw everything . . . made was very good"? (Gen. 1:31 NRSV) If knowledge is good, why did the writer of the story make God prohibit the human beings from gaining knowledge? Why did God prohibit human beings to eat the fruit of knowledge of good and evil? (Gen. 3:4, cf. Gen. 2:15-16) Is searching for knowledge of right and wrong sinful? Will human beings not experience death had they not eaten of the fruit? Will human beings remain in what Paul Tillich calls the state of "dreaming innocence" and live in this world without working and tilling the land had they not eaten of the fruit? The writer of the text highlighted that when the human beings ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, their eyes "were opened and they knew that they were naked." (Gen. 3:7) Is knowledge of the human body and of human sexuality evil? Considering that the writer of Genesis 1-3 was not physically present when God created the earth and the rest of the earthlings, we should ask: what is the author's purpose in identifying and projecting the female earthling as the "culprit" that cause what ancient theologians call as "the fall"? Why is the male earthling condoned for his passivity and lack of accountability?

On the other hand, the new lenses provided by gender, class, race, ethnicity and culture give us new insights into the text. One is the recognition that there are other ways of reading the text aside from the accepted androcentric interpretation. Feminist scholars read the text as a description of a movement from "sterile world" where no one has eaten and has given birth, towards a post Eden world that is "teeming with life."<sup>7</sup> In this teeming world, human beings/earthlings encountered challenges that made them think as active subjects. We may see that the woman's act of eating the fruit was a symbol of the courage to take risk. She crossed the boundaries to seek new knowledge and new level of existence. She believed the words of wisdom from the serpent.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Saiving, "The Human Condition: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 25-42.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition with Apocrypha, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 17.

A cultural lens provides us a corrective to our narrow reading of the text and to our prejudiced view of the serpent better known in contemporary world as snakes. Some snakes are venomous but some make good pets. In some cultures, the snake represents wisdom and healing. Medical associations and pharmaceuticals use the symbol of the caduceus, a staff with two intertwining snakes. The Romans used this caduceus as an official symbol of office when seeking a peace treaty. To other cultures, a snake shedding its skin represents the renewal of life. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of snakes both as symbols of God's punishment and of God's healing. God sent the plague of snakes that killed the "impatient" people who spoke against God and against Moses (Num. 21:6-7) But God commanded Moses to set a poisonous snake "on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." (Num 21:8-9) This imagery is used in the New Testament as a pre-figuration of Jesus being "lifted up" so that those who believe may have eternal life (John 3:14). Reading with eyes wide open, we find in this Genesis 3 story that the snake is not a liar. Rather, it served as a trickster,<sup>8</sup> one that challenges and overturns the status quo for the sake of new thinking and living a new life. To the woman, the snake became a beacon that challenged her to take a leap of faith in her search for knowledge and wisdom to become a new being. Furthermore, the presence of the snake is a clue that human beings must recognize their relationship with fellow earthlings and with the rest of God's creation. The woman did not forget that she had a male partner. She shared the fruit with him, and he ate without question.

Indeed, in the story, the man and the woman emerged from the experience of eating the fruit with their eyes opened. They became aware of their privileges and responsibilities to each other, and to the Earth. They became aware of their bodies and their being sexed creatures. The woman became aware of her godlike power – that of giving birth to a new life. Man recognized that woman is "mother of all living." (Gen. 3:22). In the third chapter of Genesis, we read that instead of encouraging passivity, God challenged human beings to be active, to exercise their potentials through work. God demonstrated love for the human beings and the dignity of labor by making garments for them. Today, to have no work is a curse. We work not only to earn a living; we work to fulfill our gifts, our potentials, and our humanity. Thus, we can say that the woman simply exercised her capacity as a subject and as a moral agent. The term "subject" points to the person who, being aware of one's physical embodiment and capability for a range of emotional-mental processes, is able to think of one's place in this world.<sup>9</sup> In God's grace, the woman as the bearer of God's image explores possibilities for life and self-hood. She did not ignore God; rather, she claimed God's gift of subjectivity. She responded to God's call for women and men to become. To become fully human, one must aim to be truly the image of God.

To be fair, one may say that the narrative in Genesis 2-3 was the writer's attempt and way to explain the origin of the world, of human beings, and of culture in his time and space. The story in Genesis emerged from the writer's creative imagination and reflection on human existence in relation to the Divine we call God. This reflection becomes part of the Hebrew Scriptures that we, Christians, have adopted as part of our Bible. Yet, one should not turn one's gaze from the reality that the writings of the Genesis author had inscribed the patriarchal values that provided an undergirding text to justify patriarchy and discrimination of women. The notion that woman dragged man into the act of disobedience and pride is only an interpretation that ignored such reality, and interpretation that Paul, Augustine and those who follow them introduced much later.

### **Jesus' View of Redemption as Intertwined with *Basileia***

Certainly, the discourse on disobedience and the fall was developed by Paul as he searched for meaning and for an explanation of the human condition. He came up with a reflection that connects the notion of disobedience, the "original sin," to the reality of death. He found an answer in the death of Jesus on the cross, which he interpreted as an act of genuine obedience to God. Paul found the account of Jesus' resurrection as a solution to people's fear and problem of death (Rom. 3:23-25; 5:18-21). After Paul's time, the writers of the gospels came up with their own reflection on sin. They saw salvation in the life of Jesus through his teachings and his ministry. In the accounts of the gospel writers, Jesus did not speak of "original sin" as Paul did; rather, Jesus insisted that sin comes from the evil motives of the heart (Matt. 15:11; Mk. 7:15). Human beings live in greed, injustice, and arrogance, and willfully refuse to resist evil that denigrates life. Thus, they are guilty of sin. Indeed, one who fails to reflect the image of God in one's daily life is a sinner.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne P. Sharp, "Subject/Subjectivity," in *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (London and New York: Arnold, 1999), 267-269.

Jesus used simple but powerful language in his teaching about redemption. His thought about redemption is intertwined with liberation. He pointed to the image of *basileia*, the reality of God's reign in a commonwealth. The reign of God (*basileia*) is characterized by the practice of justice and righteousness (*dikaiosune* – Matt. 6:33; 12:28, 21:31, 43; Matt. 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; Lk. 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1), well-being and peace (*eirene*– Lk. 1:79; 7:50; 19:42; Mk:34 NRSV). The whole synoptic gospels and the Johannine materials are not only full of Jesus' teachings about the *basileia*. They are replete with the stories of Jesus acts that made *basileia* a reality in the lives of the poor, the lame, the blind, the hungry, the captives and the lonely. Jesus' view of salvation is holistic, inclusive of body and soul, of the spiritual and material together. Salvation is about people's experience of repentance, forgiveness, and healing of broken lives and relationships. Salvation is about people sharing love, life and power to make every living creature and the Earth live in peace and flourish. In short, human beings experience salvation when they strive to become truly God's image and are happy. Jesus insisted that this is possible when persons open themselves to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit (I Thess. 5:15, 19; Eph. 4:30). While the New Testament concept of *basileia* has an eschatological dimension, Jesus' life and practice shows that when humanity takes Jesus seriously, they can experience salvation here on earth. Considering Jesus' practice of love and compassion, salvation is realized only when human beings as earthlings strive to make relationships with fellow earthlings and with God's creation right and just. Jesus' death on the cross should haunt every Christian because that death points to the refusal of human beings to practice love and compassion, justice and righteousness. Jesus was a victim of human beings' arrogance and desire to control others. The death of Jesus has salvific value only when its impact convicts human beings to stop the violence of crucifixion once and for all. Yet, human beings choose to live as sinners, rather than as redeemed people. They continue to crucify fellow earthlings in many ways. There is an absence of love and compassion among them (Hosea 4:1-6).

The failure of human beings to reflect the image of God goes beyond the personal sphere, and infects the social structures. In a vicious cycle, their sinfulness manifests in decadent and oppressive social structures that proved to be a contagion to the human psyche and behavior. A discourse on sin in terms of the personal and spiritual sphere alone will be seriously inadequate. To do so is to ignore Jesus of Nazareth who embodied God's Christ.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, one must bring into the discourse of faith the social context of sin, the reality of oppression and violation of the earth and its inhabitants. Sin is not only spiritual and personal; it is also social and ecological. Christians must face the challenge of overcoming violence spawned by their own sinfulness and desire to control.

### **Called to Share Life in Community**

God is the deepest and perfect paradigm of unity, sharing and solidarity. Thus, God called the human beings to share life in community. In the act of creating, the triune God mirrored the image of a caring community. The biblical tradition and science agree that human being came into the Earth when all the rest of the created world and beings were in place. God first created the universe and the Earth-garden before bringing human earthlings to life. God created humankind in the image of the Godself, "male and female God created them" to complete the Earth-community (Gen. 1:26-27). It is important to remember that women and men were neither created to dominate each other, nor to subjugate other groups of people and nations. Humans being, as earthlings are bound to live with other earthlings God's Earth to build caring and peace communities to make life flourish.

### **Building a Community that Affirms Life: Dismantling the Boundaries of Gender, Class, Race, Culture and Ethnicity**

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is situated in a culture that went through the long process of patriarchalization as Western colonizers subjugated the country. Ironically, it was through these invaders that Filipinos came to meet different types of Christianities. Wrapped in foreign cultures, these Christianities used a discourse about persons that was, and still is, androcentric or male-centered. Such discourse followed the view that the male person called man is the norm for humanity, and that the female person called woman is the "other". The Christian church continues to contribute to the oppression and suffering of women in church and society. The situation of inequality, discrimination, oppression and violence against women just because they are women, aptly referred to as the "woman question" cuts across class, race, ethnicity and culture.

---

<sup>10</sup> Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 18-199.

In the third millennium, one can no longer ignore the issue of gender and sexuality in any discussion about the situation and predicament of human beings. In order to live in community with God and with other earthlings, we need to depart from dualisms such as the view that the relation of women and men as image of God is not co-equal. This view was inscribed in theological writings of men like Karl Barth who insisted that God endowed “superordination” to men and “subordination” to women. Grounded in traditional Christian anthropology that does violence to the integrity of human life and destroys community, this theology undermines mutuality and reciprocity. It is important to consider the lens of gender and sexuality in articulating our statement of faith so that we will be able to clear our eyes and address the existing imbalance of power in communities. The recognition of gender justice contributes to the enrichment of human existence. However, equally important is our recognition that the imbalance of power, discrimination and violence in communities are based on race, class, culture and ethnicity. Women and men who commit themselves to Christ are called to dismantle these oppressive structures and boundaries (Gal. 3:26-29). The commitment of Christians to correct the imbalance of power in all aspects of life is crucial in setting up an alternative space or system that offers social justice, equality and peace.

To live in community with God and other earthlings means to make life flourish for human beings and other earthlings. They build communities where mutuality and reciprocity are practiced. This means human beings must learn to establish a partnership with earthlings and communities that truly honor mutual accountability, a relationship that is responsive to the needs of the partners. To live in community with God and other earthlings means to work hard to overcome the violence of domination. There will never be a community true to God’s will when the patriarchal culture continues to prevail, or when a reversal of roles of domination happens. This understanding provides a deep and profound anchor for a life that is committed to justice, healing and peace among humanity. To mirror the image God and to live in community with God means to put into practice the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth to love one another (Jn. 15:17). Living in community with God requires the memory and practice of loving God “with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “loving your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40). The summary of the Mosaic Law and the prophetic teachings that says “Do for others what you want them to do for you” (Matt. 7:12) finds a parallel in the Golden Rule held by other Asian religions. This could serve as a starting point for a conversation with people of other faiths and ideologies to build communities of peace for all.

### **Building a Community that Affirms Earth-Life**

*That being entrusted with God’s creation,  
they are called to participate in the establishment  
of a just and compassionate social order.*

To live in community is not simply about co-existence. It is living out a symbiotic life of giving and receiving with fellow earthlings – both human and non-human citizens of the Earth. Christians need to humbly acknowledge that the anthropocentric (human-centered, especially male human) tradition where we come from contributes to the destruction of the Earth. This Judeo-Christian tradition (Gen. 1:26b) fueled the obsession of human beings to control and have dominion over the Earth and God’s creation. Human beings, especially men, claimed centrality in God’s creation. The emergence of science that highlights the male-centered production of knowledge led to humankind’s abuse of power over the Earth’s body and her bowels. We have seen how this ecological destruction resulted to the degradation of life of all living beings. Human beings continue to inflict violence on the Earth and this has clearly taken its toll not only on human life, but also on all forms of life – of all earthlings. Even in the midst of the devastating environmental disaster, human beings continue to refuse to take seriously the non-human creatures as our partners in building and living in a peace-full community with God. To mirror God’s image in our day-to-day lives requires our understanding and respect of Earth rights – “those rights that demonstrate the connection between human well-being and a sound environment.”<sup>11</sup> “This is because living in community with God and with all creation demands a deep understanding that “human rights, an ecologically sound environment, sustainable development and peace are interdependent and indivisible.”<sup>12</sup>

Somehow, we need to liberate ourselves from the doctrine of “dominion” over God’s creation that is enshrined in the Judeo-Christian sacred texts (Gen. 1:28-30; Ps. 8:6-8). We need to redefine our relationship with the Earth because it has been proven through experience that even the Christian view of “stewardship” did not save us from

---

<sup>11</sup> EarthRights International, *EarthRights: Linking Human Rights and Ecological Protection* (Washington D.C.: EarthRights International, 1999), 1. This statement is draft Principle One on Human Rights and the Environment.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

inflicting violence on the Earth and ourselves. We have so much to learn from the traditions of indigenous peoples that honor the interconnectedness of human life with Earth's life. Biblical tradition also reminds us that God established a community that was inclusive of human and non-human beings (Gen. 9:8-17). In honoring these traditions, human beings fulfill their purpose in life: to live in community with God and all of Creation. To image God, therefore, is to live in harmony with the Earth community and with God.

### **The Challenge to Radiate God's Image in Us**

The Christian thinkers constructed the doctrine of sin to explain our tendencies to turn away from the responsibility of imaging God in our lives. Rather than making excuses that we do that "sapagkat kami ay tao lamang," – that because we are *only* human - people can say we are able to refuse to do evil because we are the bearers of God's image. The challenge is for us to ask ourselves every moment: Whose image do we radiate? Is it the image of the God of justice, love and compassion? Then we can clearly say that we affirm the God whose essence is the fullness of life. In doing so, we who are created in God's image must honor and celebrate God's gift of life. Ultimately, the meaning of our being created in God's image lies in our capacity to re-create life in us and in our midst, and to let life flourish. This understanding signals the coming of the new humanity – ones who recognized their being earthlings, ones who value their connectedness with the Earth as "God's body."<sup>13</sup> We can do this if we learn to celebrate the diversity and plurality of persons of created beings in this world. We need to learn to celebrate one another. In the midst of an immoral society, we are called to claim our subjectivity as moral agents and struggle for the fullness of life for all. We can do this if we consciously and constantly find ways to stay connected to the Source of the Breath of Life. We make known the mystery that makes us who we are today – the God who created us in the image of the Godself. ☺

### **References**

- Antone, Hope S. "Making Sense of Christ's Atonement." In *God's Image* Vol. 22, No. 4 (December 2003): 35-39.
- Brown, Framcos, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001.
- Danker, Frederick William, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and Walter Bauer, eds. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- EarthRights International. *Earth Rights: Linking Human Rights and Ecological Protection*. Washington, D.C.: EarthRights International, 1999.
- Fung, Raymund. "Evangelism Today: The Sinners and the Sinned-Against." In *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, Revised Edition, edited by Douglas J. Elwood, 200-212. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980.
- Kwok Pui-lan. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- McDowell, Linda and Joanne P. Sharp, eds., *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography*. London and New York: Arnold, 1999.
- Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).
- Niditch, Susan. "Genesis." In *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition with Apocrypha*, Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 13-29. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Orevillo-Montenegro, Muriel, *The Jesus of Asian Women*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 18-199.
- Saiving, Valerie, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, 25-42 New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), .
- Sharp, Joanne P. "Subject/Subjectivity," in *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp, 266-269. London and New York: Arnold, 1999), .

---

<sup>13</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).

# **“Like A Two-Edged Sword”: The Bible in the UCCP Statement of Faith**

**Noriel C. Capulong**

## **Introduction**

We believe

*That the Holy Bible is a faithful and inspired witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and in history to illumine, guide, correct and edify believers in their faith and witness.*

## **Scripture as Word of God**

One question that was often raised during several church gatherings where the Statement of Faith (SoF) was discussed was why was there no categorical statement in the SoF about Scripture being the Word of God. Being a late comer to the Faith and Order Commission I have no access to the exact theological reason of the earlier Faith and Order Committees for doing so. But let me venture an answer based on my own theological understanding of the Scripture.

There is no question over the issue of the Bible being the Word of God. This is something that we need to affirm. It is a *given* in the very nature of the Bible. When we talk however of the Bible being the Word of God we would need to provide for a clarification of certain categories of the word of God as revealed in the Bible. There are actually various levels or categories of *the word of God* in the Bible. First, there is the word that creates or *the creative word* as we see in the creation story in Gen 1. That is, when God speaks the word: “Let there be light, and so on...” Then it becomes so. Our life, our environment, our world, the whole universe, our total existence have all come to be mainly because of the word of God that creates and now sustains us. This is the word which creates and gives life and sustains it, as we can see in the creation stories in both Genesis 1 and 2. Without this creating, sustaining word of God, we are nothing.

Second, aside from the word of God that creates and sustains us and the whole creation, there is also God's word that creates history and judges it. This is what we can also call the *prophetic word*. The Hebrew term for the “word” that is uttered by God to create through speech (*dabhar elohim* - word of God) is actually the same term used in creating events in history and judging it. When the prophet makes the announcement “Thus says the Lord! (*kho dabhar YHWH*), the prophet in effect becomes the very mouthpiece through which the Lord God speaks either in terms of judgment, or salvation, condemnation or forgiveness, denunciation or restoration, punishment or assurance of hope and comfort. This, you can very well see from the books of various prophets, from that of Isaiah to Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the minor but still very important prophets like Amos, Hosea, Micah, Habakkuk, and others.

Thus, we can say that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth using the “word” (*dabhar*) as well as the Creator and Judge of history through the word (*dabhar*) that is placed in the mouth of God's chosen prophets.

Moses himself is recognized as the prophet of God *par excellence* whom the Lord knew and to whom God gave God's word face to face according to Exodus 33:11ff and Deuteronomy (34:10). God called Moses and gave God's word to him and Moses obeyed and spoke the word of God before the Pharaoh of Egypt. The result was the birth of Israel and the start of their history as a nation of liberated slaves, all by the power of God's word spoken through God's prophet Moses. Thus history is created by the events ushered in by the word of God as spoken through the prophet.

Thirdly, there is also the word of God spoken through the Sages, the wise women and men. These are words spoken as Wisdom counsel (*hokmah*) as exemplified in the Book of Proverbs mainly addressed to the young to train them in the proper manners, values and priorities and guide them towards responsible, mature decision making for the attainment of life that is at peace with each other in the community and with their environment. This is the word that teaches time-tested and community-affirming values such as respect for elders and authority, frugality, hard work and industriousness, true friendship, avoidance of lust and immoral conduct, kindness and compassion towards the poor, traits of a good leader, fear of the Lord as the real beginning of wisdom, etc.



Finally, there is the word of God that was revealed in person, Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus Christ, for all believers, becomes the most complete, most authentic, most profound word ever spoken by God. *Jesus Christ is the Word of God*, the *Logos*, that has become flesh. (John 1:1, 14). This is also very eloquently stated in 1John 1:1-3:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and *testify to it*, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. (italics added)

Jesus is *The Word* that was not only uttered and heard but has been seen, and encountered concretely, live in person, and faithfully witnessed to by His disciples.

This could be the level or category of the word of God we may be referring to or thinking of when we consider the Bible as the Word of God. In a way, yes, for the word of God in the Bible has been revealed in various forms and categories as said in Hebrews 1:1. But the ultimate, most authentic, most authoritative revelation of the word of God comes to us not in the form of a book but in the form of a person, Jesus Christ. We know however that the record of this most authentic, most authoritative Word of God can be found faithfully preserved right there in the Bible. "In these last days," according to Heb 1:2, "God spoke to us by a Son." In effect, the Bible is the record of the ultimate Word of God that has become flesh but which is now accessible to us through the written word.

### **A Faithful Witness to Jesus Christ as the Word of God**

The Bible has been described as a faithful witness because of the centrality of the concept of witnessing as a primary means by which the Christian faith was preserved, proclaimed and defended before all peoples, even to peoples and empires that have responded to it with hostility and even persecution.

Witness, based on its popular application is actually more of a legal term originating from the context of a courtroom. A witness to a certain case, when asked to give his/her testimony is always placed under oath and thus obligated and expected to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This is very important, for much of the case is dependent on the faithfulness or truthfulness of a witness in relating what is it that he/she saw, or heard, or experienced and observed. Without a faithful, truthful witness or when the witness begins to share something which is not true, or something that is only half true, then it is very possible that there will be a miscarriage of justice in the resolution of a certain case.

In a way, the Bible is expressly claimed by its writers as their witness. The prophets claimed they are witnesses to the word of God revealed to them. They claim to be reporting the vision of the word of God which they saw (Is. 1:1; Ezek. 1:1), or simply the word of the Lord that comes to them as that of Jeremiah (1:1), and the rest of the minor prophets. But they could be the event itself of Jesus' life, ministry, crucifixion and rising from the dead to which the disciples now are claiming to be witnesses as what Peter claims in his long speech during the Pentecost event in Acts 2:32: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

The writer of the Gospel of John in chap. 21:24 of his gospel, after narrating all that he wants to share about Jesus and after arriving at his concluding chapter in ch.21 now claims that "[I]t is this same disciple who is the witness to these things; it is he who wrote them down and his testimony, we know, is true." (NAB) In the book of Acts, again, it is reported how the rest of the apostles bore witness with "great power" to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:33). In effect, we can say that if the Old Testament bears witness to the creative, prophetic and wisdom word of God, the New Testament claims to be a witness to the life, teachings, ministry, death and most of all, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Finally, in this matter of the witness of the Bible, we can take note of the fact that Jesus Christ himself described the Scriptures as bearing witness to him. When the Jewish officials thought of arresting Jesus after he made a lame man walk in violation of the Sabbath law, Jesus said to them, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf." (John 5:39)

Thus, the UCCP, through the Statement of Faith affirms that the Bible, as affirmed by the prophets, the disciples and the Lord Jesus is a faithful witness to everything that is recorded there. That is, every individual and community sources of the various materials in the Bible, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit have been faithful and truthful in preserving, recording and relaying now to us those matters and events in the Scripture that were revealed to them or which they have encountered in their life and to which they have responded in the light of their faith convictions. What we therefore have now is the inspired product of a community and collective witness of the church as guided by the Holy Spirit as she tries to be faithful in her response to the divine initiative and revelation that has taken place in history and in the person of Jesus Christ.

## **The Authority of the Bible**

### **Authority as relational**

This brings us to the point which is quite related to the first issue we just discussed above. What then is the authority of the Bible? This topic is actually one of the broadest as well as critical fields of discussion indicating how seriously Bible scholars, pastors, and Christians have taken this issue. In my view however, the issue of authority of the Bible has to be considered by us always in two ways, first, in a relational context and second, in a communal context. In the first we have to be clear on how we relate ourselves to the Bible. In the second, we have to be clear on our relationship with the community of the church which provides us with the teaching guidance in the reading and interpretation of the Bible for our appropriation in our life. How do we make use of the Bible in our life? Our acceptance of the authority of the Bible is one aspect of our faith in God and of our commitment to be part of the community of faith which carries out its mission and ministry as guided by her teachings and mandates emanating from the Bible. Acknowledgement of Biblical authority on the relational as well as communal aspect is part of and an expression of a faith attitude.

When we deal with a portion of the Scripture and reflect upon it, the question that we may have to ask right in the very beginning is not about historical-critical issues, or who wrote the material. It is not about the background of the text, or how factual the story is.

Even if these questions remain important for the understanding of the original message of a text and its background and should not be completely neglected, they do not provide the basis for an abiding authority of the Bible. The more primary and central question we should ask whenever we are confronted by a text could be something like this: In what way does this text fit in with the larger question of my faith in Jesus Christ and the doing of His will, and the obeying of His word, and the upbuilding of faith, not just my faith but that of the community where I belong? This is a primary question that must be addressed by any believer reading a text of the Scripture regardless of whether the passage is doctrinal, or moral teaching, or historical narration, or a plain testimony. Regardless of the exegetical issues of form and context, the primary question of its pastoral meaning and demand in the life of the believer and of the church must be addressed.

This means, a reader, along with the community of the church studying it always has to keep on addressing questions right to the text in a way that will make the text provide indicators and hints of the issues that are reflected therein and the corresponding faith implications for the practice of the believer and of the church. One may be asked: "In what way is this text addressing me and confronting me and my role in the church?"

In Hebrews 4:12, we read that "that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Considering the very powerful description given in Hebrews, we can then continue to reflect and ask, "In what way does a particular text pierce our heart and soul?" "In what way does a text judge us or shake us down to the very depths of our being?" "Or does a text simply affirm my long standing beliefs and convictions, or does it challenge what I consider as the very foundations of my faith?" Does it open up to me new possibilities about the practice and living of my faith and that of the church or does it simply make rigid and frozen my own faith and my own church's assumptions?

Does it disturb me in a way that would lead me and my church to raise fundamental faith questions just like Job (Job 19:6-7; 24:1-3) or Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1; 15:18), or just like Jesus (Mk 15:34; Mat 27:46) ? Does it lead me and my church towards a life of contented withdrawal and isolation from issues of life and faith? Does it lead me and my church towards a renewed experience of dialogue and partnership with my God or does it lead us to an understanding of a God who is simply so detached, so aloof and is just imposing one demand on us after another?

If we, as a church, take the passages of the Scriptures seriously, and if we do accept as a community of faith the authority of a particular biblical lesson, we can put this question more simply: what changes should we as a church undertake in our life and in our mission?

### **Authority Premised on Faith and Trust**

The truth is, the basis of Biblical authority lies in its efficacy in the faith relationship that we have with our God on how effective it is in enhancing our faith relationship with our God and in our relationship with the community of the church. For such efficacy becomes operative in us as we accept its reality in faith and trust in its power and authority to change and transform our lives and our community, by the grace of God's Holy Spirit as we hear its voice speaking with power and authority directly addressing us, cutting us down like a two-edged sword, compelling us to humble ourselves and calling us to repentance and renewal of our individual and collective lives.

Without any sincere desire to change, to be confronted and be humbled by the power of God's word, without any sincere desire to cast off our old selves and allow God's power to transform us, the authority of the Bible will just remain a cold doctrinal concept.

### **The Misappropriation of the Authority of the Bible**

On another level, however, instead of being open and desirous of real, transforming change in life and community, many Christians throughout history had used the Bible as an instrument to justify the preservation of an unjust and unequal status quo. Taking advantage of its predominantly patriarchal and male-centered view, language and culture, many have used the Bible throughout history as an instrument of domination and subjugation of peoples and nations and even of class and gender, like asserting the superiority of the whites over the blacks, of the men over the women and the maintenance of slavery.<sup>1</sup> It had been quoted to justify the system of racial segregation even in the United States and the apartheid in South Africa before. It has been used to justify the kidnapping of the natives of Africa in order to have slave labor in the cotton fields of the southern United States. It has been clearly used by Spain as their main instrument in the colonization and cultural domination of the Filipinos and it has been definitely used by the U.S. to justify the illegal invasion of the Philippines and the brutal and bloody suppression of native resistance and the resurgent revolutionary and nationalist spirit of the Filipinos then (Ps. 2:7-9).

We should not forget how the notion of "to have dominion" in Gen. 1:26, 28) was often used with a mistaken notion of stewardship to irresponsibly destroy and devastate the environment for the sake of profit. In such instances, the Bible has failed to function like a double edged sword that can challenge as well as pierce the heart of people. It has become in effect a domesticated and convenient tool in the hands of those with power and privilege bent on resisting any meaningful transformation in their lives and in their society.

To make it truly function in all its power and authority, the readers must approach and read the Bible always in the spirit of deep awe, humility and openness to any mandate for change that may emanate from its pages. We need to recognize and be honest with all of our assumptions, vested interests, prejudices and biases that we often bring in the process of interpretation which are usually colored by our own distinct theological and dogmatic understanding and even our cultural and educational locations. We need to accept and recognize that the reading and interpretation of a group of farmers in a small countryside church especially of the "farming" stories in the Bible, like most of the parables, would be colored and infused with their own experiences and background and would always be different, but not inferior to the reading being done by a group of intellectuals in a big city church. For the Bible is quite open to a variety of perspectives being brought into it by various groups of readers and interpreters.

This makes the Bible so distinct from all other books, a truly holy, sacred or set apart book. But in order to appreciate such sacred, set apart character of the Bible there has to be first and foremost this faith commitment as we read and study the Bible. We read and reflect upon it always with the eyes of faith and always in the context of the believing community where we belong. We can never appreciate and experience the fullness of its power and authority if we read it just like any other literature, with an objective, detached, highly rationalistic and sometimes even coldly cynical, scientific and so individualistic perspective.

The Bible was written not by philosophers, not by pure intellectual, rational heroes, those identified in Psychology as the left-brained people but mostly by people of the right brain. These are people who are responding from their gut level, with much of their intuitive, spiritual insight, with all the totality of their emotion and being to the divine revelation and imperative being revealed to them. Like the Psalms, these were written by people in different states of emotional and spiritual passion and intensity of feeling.

Thus, there were Psalms raising very serious complaints and laments addressed to God. Some were even written in the spirit of deep frustration, alienation and disgust over their state of suffering. Some would even utter words of cursing against their enemy who had caused their suffering, praying to God that they be justly vindicated (Ps. 137:7-9). Many however were written in the peak of spiritual outburst of delight and unbounded joy as in the various

---

<sup>1</sup> We may note for instance the way the text of Gen. 9:24-27 on the curse of Ham has been used to justify the practice of slavery of the blacks in Southern USA. For comments on the strongly patriarchal and andocentric character of the stories of the Bible, see for example, from among so many, the works of Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Letty Russel, ed. *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); and Kwok Pui-lan, "Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (NY, N.Y.: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1993), 101-116.

Psalms of praise, praising God for God's unfailing goodness and mercy. We encounter in different parts of the book of Psalms the expression: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Psalm 136:1) as well as the call, "Give praise to the Lord" especially in the last few chapters of Psalms (Ps. 146-150) which are typical examples of this gut level expressions of the Psalmist.

Even the prophet Jeremiah, in the midst of growing alienation, indifference from his own people and family and then persecution by the very people he hoped would listen to his message could only exclaim in utter desperation: "Curse be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed . . . for why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?" (Jer. 20:14, 18).

These are all products of souls that have continuously wrestled, debated and dialogued with and still trusted in their God even in the midst of extreme threats to their existence, even in the midst of realities which appear to contradict or negate the promises and assurances of their God. What comes out in all these is the abiding faith and trust of these Psalmists and the prophets in their God whatever the times may bring.

Here lies the basic authority of our Bible, in its power not just to change and transform lives but in its inherent power to elicit an abiding trust in the trustworthiness of its claims and in the promises and assurances of God in spite of seemingly contradictory realities. It can be relied upon as a source of hope and newness even in the midst of apparent hopelessness and despair around us.

### **Power and Authority to Revive the Saving Memory of the Past**

The Bible has a particular perspective that is anchored on the central and formative events of the past which remains very valuable for the nurturing of our faith for today. For the memory of what God has done in the past, be it in the event of Exodus for the Jews or the event of Jesus Christ for us Christians, will remain deeply imbedded as an indestructible foundation of our faith. Thus, we continue to have reason to be forever grateful for the things God has done in the past.

Without the memory of those events in the past we would not know how we can go about in the midst of the uncertainties of the present and we will find it difficult to trust in the promise of a new future being offered to us. But what God has done for us in the past as faithfully witnessed to in the Bible now serves as guarantee of what God will also faithfully do in the present and in the future. Thus, we can have the strength to carry on in the present and be able to look forward to a new future with much hope, faith, trust and great anticipation.

### **Authority that evokes a New Vision for the Future**

At the same time, the authority and power of the Bible lies also in the fact of its inherent ability to evoke in its readers a vision of a truly new future, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth as initially proclaimed in Isaiah 65:17-25, and reaffirmed in Rev. 21:1-4. It is only among those who believe in the authority of the Scriptures that such vision and hope can be nurtured. That is a future where there shall be no more weeping and crying of victims of injustice, where there shall be no more infants that live for just a few days because of extreme deprivation, where carnivorous animals like the lions shall become vegetarians and feed together with the ox.

There is also the vision of a kingdom with the king ruling with justice and righteousness, defending the cause of the poor, giving deliverance to the needy and crushing the oppressor as seen, among others, in Psalm 72. There is also the vision of the kingdom of God whose qualities are described in various parables like the one which envisions the kingdom as like that of a banquet table (Luke 14:15-24). There we see the Lord as the host, after the invitation extended to the privileged ones had been refused, now inviting everyone to join including the women and children, the beggars, the blind and the lame, and where everyone is considered equal regardless of race, creed, gender, or social status.

There is also the vision of nations gathered together in peace transforming their weapons of war into tools for peaceful production, as envisioned by the prophets Isaiah and Micah, where peoples

*shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-5)*

There is the vision of all the nations of the world in Matthew 25:31-46, being gathered by Jesus before the judgment throne on the day of judgment, and judging them like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. This is where final judgment is rendered on the basis of whatever they have done to the least of their brethren, those who are hungry, thirsty, those without clothes, without home and those who are sick and imprisoned.

This kind of vision for the future being evoked on the faithful readers, no matter how seemingly unrealistic it may be somehow becomes quite a concrete reality in the faith of those who believe and accept the authority of such words.

Thus it becomes a source of hope that can strengthen the believer in coping and even in struggling for life amidst the contradictions of the present.

At the same time this mode of vision for the future serves as a basis for the kind of direction our transformed life should take, the kind of concerns we should take up and the kind of mission imperatives we should emphasize. But for us to appreciate this kind of vision being evoked among the readers, we need that faith perspective and commitment, together with a sensitive heart and spirit and a prophetic and poetic imagination for it to become a compelling, authoritative word for us.

For all these visions and many more cited in different parts of the Bible, including that of Revelation, speak of highly poetic images of a future time that is essentially different and in contrast with what we are going through these days. They speak of a present world in agony, in turmoil, filled with suffering and persecution. Yet they also speak of a world where all such agony, suffering and injustice will be removed, where all tears shall be wiped away, and where the dwelling of God will finally be on earth as stated in Rev. 21:3: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be His peoples, and God himself will be with them."

We, however, can appreciate the fullness of the depth of the message of such visions only if we have that imaginative faith and the poetic envisioning and courageous hope of a prophet of God, and the humble pleading for the guidance of the Holy Spirit which can transcend even the most distressful and despairing present. Thus, Christians with this kind of commitment and perspective will never give up this hope and faith in the eventual realization of a new future. This is because the committed Christian believes and trusts fully in the authority and trustworthiness of what has been promised in those declarations. The word of God as spoken through the prophets and most of all as spoken and lived by Jesus, with all its claims, declarations and promises for the future are all trustworthy, then, now and for all time. This makes Christianity, especially, evangelical Christianity more of a forward looking, always future oriented faith as faithfully witnessed to by the Bible.

### **Authority Derived from the Canon of Scripture Itself**

Furthermore, on this point of authority of the Bible, we should also be reminded that a great part of our Bible, specifically, the Old Testament, was the very Scripture used by Jesus in his own teaching. It was the Jewish Scripture tradition reflected in our Old Testament which for Jesus was the primary source and basis of his new teaching. At the time of his resurrection he appeared to his disciples and referred to the Scripture in Luke 24:44: "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms had to be fulfilled." There, he reviewed before them the meaning of his coming, his death and his resurrection as prophesied in the three-part division of the Jewish Canon, the Law of Moses, comprising of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Prophets, and the Writings represented in the text by the most popular book then, the Psalms. For Jesus, his teachings, his life, death and resurrection, his whole lordship acquired meaning and significance mainly because they were rooted, prophesied, and has an authoritative basis in the Scripture tradition that he grew up with.

It is clear that Jesus himself testified to the Scriptural basis of his life and ministry, and accepted the canonical Scripture tradition then in the Old Testament as something that testifies to himself and to his ministry. Because of this we could only then but acknowledge and accept the Scriptural authority of the Bible in its canonical whole as it speaks through the wide variety of traditions and voices that we can now hear in its various parts.

### **The Inclusiveness of Biblical Authority**

There is so much variety and diversity of witnesses and actual theological voices testified to in the whole Scripture that we cannot help but be amazed at such great variety and richness of the testimonies coming from different witnesses. There is so much richness in the diverse voices witnessing to the different ways by which God has revealed and expressed love and grace to the people and to the rest of creation.

God has shown how God cared both for God's people Israel as well as people from other nations before whom Israel is called to be a blessing and a light to them (Gen.12:1-3; Is. 49:6). God has shown through Jesus how much God cared for people such as the Jews as well as other people like the Samaritans, the Roman Centurion and even other Gentiles such as the Syro-Phoenician woman (Gen. 9:16-17; Matt. 15:21-28; 8:5-13, Luke 17:11-19). God, through Jesus has shown how these people can also be sources of blessing and healing to God's own people like the deed carried out by the Good Samaritan, (Luke 10:25-37) and how such people can be even more capable of expressing true gratitude and faith (Luke 17:11-19).

There is so much variety of testimonies about the wonder and beauty of God's creation in Gen. 1, 2 and in various parts of the Psalms (Ps. 135-136), and in the Prophets (Is. 40). There is so much variety of the laws proclaimed by Moses in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy as well as variety of the versions of the story

of Israel, the rise and fall of the monarchy from the books of Kings, Chronicles and even from the prophets. Certainly, we see also a lot of variety in the stories of the life, ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus as told in four versions of the Gospel. There is also so much variety of the epistles written by the Apostle Paul, each one addressing particular issues in specific churches in his own time.

There is just so much variety and richness of perspectives testified to therein, the creation perspective, the legal perspective, the covenant perspective, the prophetic perspective, the wisdom perspective, the Gospel perspective, the apocalyptic perspective, and many more, are just so enormous and amazing. They only but point to the fact that the Bible, its message and its authority is just too rich and too wonderfully deep in content that no amount of exclusivistic human effort can comprehend it all. We can only see through its mystery all but dimly like in a mirror, as stated by Paul in I Cor. 13:12. This is why we can only but celebrate with awe and humility such wonderful richness and variety and inclusiveness and be thankful for such a gift God has given us.

### **The Authority of the Words and Person of Jesus**

Finally, we now consider the New Testament, together with the Old Testament, as source of truly authoritative teaching, not only because it is a source of a truly faithful, comprehensive, inclusive and compelling witness to Jesus and the life of the disciples and the apostles. It is authoritative because through it, we are confronted not just with the words but with the very person of Jesus coming to us with his own authoritative teaching. No other book is able to do this, confronting us with its living, dynamic witness to our risen Lord.

Here Jesus, according to the Gospel witnesses taught, not like the scribes of his day. But he taught as one with authority (Mark 1:22). He carried out deeds of healing and various mighty acts that left people so awestruck in deep amazement, leading them to praise God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:12) There is really something new, something totally unprecedented with what Jesus is doing, speaking and offering to the people. It is something totally different from what people have been used to. It is something that can truly shake up, challenge, threaten, change and transform lives.

The Bible has such an authority because in it, people are made to experience something they have not experienced before. They are made to see something they have not seen and heard before. It cannot but leave people in deep amazement and awe. If the Bible also elicits this kind of feelings and effect on us as we read it ourselves, if it is able to compel us to dare make decisions we have not made before, if it is able to compel us to accept something that we have not really thought of before, if it has truly shaken up our lives towards a new perspective in life then we can be sure the authority and life-changing power of the Bible is just beginning to take hold of our life as believers.

### **On the Issue of Infallibility of the Bible**

Perhaps, we can relate this issue of Biblical infallibility or the claim that the Bible has no error at all to the issue also of divine inspiration. For many people tend to associate divine inspiration with infallibility itself, as if to say that if the Scripture showed indications of being fallible or inconsistent with the facts of history or even in some of its parts, then it is no longer inspired. I believe that one does not necessarily nor automatically follow the other. For one, the Bible as Scripture very seldom points to itself, or describes itself or arrogates unto itself a very distinct category such as that of infallibility. More dominantly, it points to something or to someone other than and beyond itself. Certainly, being a faithful witness, it points to no other than Jesus as the Christ, as the Lord and Son of God, redeemer and fulfiller of all our hopes and dreams for salvation and new life.

The claim of infallibility was not made by the Scripture for itself and definitely it has no right to make such a claim for itself. For there is only one to whom we can ascribe the category and quality of infallibility, and that is God who revealed the Godself in the most authentic manner in and through Jesus Christ. For, as already made familiar to us, "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, God ways are not our ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and God's thoughts higher than our thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9).

We can ascribe infallibility only to God and to no one else. For we can never be in a position to judge, measure, nor evaluate the ways and thoughts of God with our own human categories of thought and reasoning. We can be in a position to evaluate the records and the witness of the Bible, but we cannot evaluate God. For how can we place the Bible which is but an instrument, a creation of God, on the same level and category with God the Creator? To do this is precisely what we would call bibliolatry or idolatry of the Bible.

Perhaps among the few texts that may possibly indicate the Bible as pointing to itself and to its nature is the classic text in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that says: "All scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that every one who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

For one, the Scripture being referred to here in the text of Timothy as being inspired is that of the Jewish Scriptures, our own Old Testament which was also the Bible of the apostles like Paul. At the time of the writing of the letters to Timothy, there was yet no New Testament Scripture to speak of. There could be the individual letters of Paul circulating to the different churches but they were not yet collated together. The Gospels were still in process of being written or being used in just the initial location where each was written. But definitely, there was no New Testament canon yet to speak of.

To be inspired literally means, something breathed into by God. It is something that bears in it the life-giving breath or power of God. What our text in Timothy is saying that the Jewish Scriptures, being inspired or breathed into by God is basically a useful tool, or profitable for the teaching of doctrine, for reproof of those getting strayed into the wrong path, for the correction of false doctrines and for instruction in the life of righteousness. The Scriptures therefore is inspired for its being a useful instrument for the nurturing, strengthening and building up of the faith of the worshipping community. This text has nothing to do with any claims of accuracy or infallibility, nor is it staking a claim as the sole foundation of all correct and sound doctrine.

Perfection as a quality belongs only to God. For our faith to become authentic faith it is our relationship with Christ that must serve as the source and foundation. It is the message of Good News, the Gospel of grace in and through Jesus Christ that is the source of the foundation of faith. The truth is, without this foundation, there would not have been any Bible at all.

The Bible came into existence because there were men and women of faith who believed on the ground of God's promises and God's grace, at a time when there was yet no Bible. They then composed what was to become the Bible as the written crystallization of their faith experiences within their own tradition, shaped by their own culture within their own history and within their own community. In a real sense, the first women and men of the Bible had no Bible. Abraham believed God not because he read about it in the Bible but because he heard God's voice and obeyed simply in faith and trust.

Our faith relationship with God remains primary and therefore this faith and trust relationship with God gives us the right and the duty to study and examine the Bible with the critical tools God has also made available for us for our deeper and broader understanding of the power and implication of the word of God in our lives today.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible was written with a very different cultural, linguistic and historical perspective from ours. It was written from a purely theocentric and pre-scientific mode of thinking. That is why it was all written in the language of faith, not of logic, nor scientific treatise. It was all written in the language of confession, either in plain narration, in profound poetry or in dramatic preaching, proclamation and exhortation. Once we adopt the language of the Bible as a language for debate and argumentation, then the very purpose for which this was written gets obscured if not distorted.

### **How then do we Study the Bible?**

First, we do not let the Bible gather dust in our shelves. Second, do not use it simply as a source of ammunition for debate. The Bible was given to us as a tool, a primary instrument for the nurturing of our faith, for the deepening of our understanding of the word of God as spoken in many and various ways but most concretely in and through Jesus Christ. Third, come to the Bible in the spirit of prayer and dialogue, asking always for God's guidance through the Holy Spirit, accepting always our human incapacity to fully comprehend God's ways and thoughts. Just like Paul we can only see dimly through a mirror. Only on the final day of judgment will these things be fully revealed and made clear to us (I Cor. 13:12). Until then we only have to trust in God's goodness and in the guidance of His Spirit.

By dialogue, I mean we approach a text of the Bible with our own questions addressed to it, questions that bear on our faith, our life and our witness. By starting to read the text and addressing it with our honest questions, you will be amazed at the kind of answers you will get just from that dialogue experience you will have with the text. They could be answers that could truly surprise you if not shock you if you will just allow the text to speak to you on its own terms and not on your own.

Fourth, try to read not always by individual verses only. But read instead concrete units of thought in every passage. This could be a whole short story, a whole parable, a whole episode in the life of Jesus, or a whole chapter which may contain a complete unit of thought. For verse numberings and chapter divisions in our Bible came out very late and the manner by which some verses were divided in some places tend also to cut or divide certain units of thought.

---

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 56, 63.

Fifth, being a property of the believing community, the church, let us keep on studying the Bible in the context of the community, always as part of a church group Bible study session. For the dialogues you will have will not just be with the text but also with the other members of the group. This will certainly be very enriching for our own faith nurturing and that of the rest of the members of the community of the church. Listening to others' own faith perspectives in light of the text they are studying will certainly be very helpful in broadening and expanding our own horizon of faith, witness and service.

Sixth, as you go through this experience try to get some help from helpful sources. Try to help your church and your pastor acquire a good biblical and theological library which he or she can use in leading various Bible study groups in your church, especially on basic helps such as Bible Atlases, Bible Dictionaries, Concordances, and lastly, good commentaries, even through computer programs, if they are cheaper in the long run.

In closing however let this be just the beginning of a continuing process of sharing, listening and learning from each other's faith perspectives, and may we find this helpful and enriching enough for our own faith journeys.

Amen.

## References

- Achtemeier, Paul. *The Inspiration of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980.
- Barr, James *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980.
- Buttrick, George A. and Keith R. Crim, eds. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1962
- Carino, Feliciano, ed. *Like a Mustard Seed: Commentaries on the UCCP Statement of Faith*. Manila: UCCP, 1987.
- Freedman, David Noel and Allen Myers, eds. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI. and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.
- Kwok Pui-lan, "Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 101-116. NY, N.Y.: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1993.
- Russel, Letty, ed. *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.
- The 1993 UCCP Constitution and By-Laws*. Quezon City: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1998.
- The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version of the Bible. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952.
- The New American Bible*. Washington D.C.: Catholic Publishers, Inc., 1971.
- The Holy Bible*. New Revised Standard Version. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.



# The Church: The Household of God

Bishop Erme R. Camba

*We believe:*

*That the Church is the one body of Christ,  
the whole community of persons reconciled to God  
through Jesus Christ and entrusted with God's ministry.  
(UCCP Statement of Faith, 1992)*

*The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is an integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. (UCCP Constitution, 1993/94, Art. II, Sec. 1)*

## Introduction

The English word “church” finds its root in the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “a gathering of people with shared beliefs.” Filipinos recognize it in the Spanish *iglesia*, a term most often used in the Philippines, although in several Filipino languages the word used is *simbahan* which usually refers to the place of worship. Jesus uttered the word “church” two times (Matthew 16:18; Matthew 18:17), the most important of which is related to Peter’s confession that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” where Jesus said: “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (*ekklesia*), and the power of death shall not prevail against it.”

There are a hundred or more images, symbols and metaphors referring to the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul S. Minear, in his book *The Images of the Church in the New Testament*, listed 96 images.<sup>1</sup> The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) uses one of the most significant images, the “the Body of Christ” (I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16). In addition to the Statement of Faith, the new Constitution of the UCCP appropriates the traditional “marks of the Church” and categorically states that the *UCCP is an integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ*. Related to the concept of the “body of Christ” is another New Testament image, the “Household of God” (in Greek, *oikos* means house) (Eph. 2:19; I Peter 4:17; Cf. Heb. 3:1-6). For our purpose we are suggesting this image of the Church because it is closer to the Filipino culture and experience. This chapter uses all these three concepts in the following outline:

1. The Church as the Body of Christ
2. The Church as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.
3. The Church as Household of God.

## A Historical Overview

Basic to the understanding of the Church from the point of view of the UCCP is a statement from the Basis of Union, the first official document of the uniting churches, where it says:

We do preserve all of the heritage of faith brought into the Union by each of the constituent Churches and hereby declare as our common faith and message: Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord and Savior. (*UCCP Basis of Union 1948, Art. III*)<sup>2</sup>

The unifying and binding confession of the new United Church (1948) was “our common faith and message: Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God and Savior.” All the doctrines and practices of the uniting churches were accepted by the new Church even, for example, the Church of Christ Disciples that did not have a statement but a principle which says “No Creed but Christ, no Law but Love.” Our fore-parents were open to the variety the faith traditions, expressions and interpretations including the liturgical practices and forms of the sacraments.

---

<sup>1</sup>Paul S. Minear, *The Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>Cited in T. Valentino Sitoy, Jr., *Several Springs, One Stream, Vol. I* (Quezon City: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1992), 486.

There was no unified statement on the church and church practices except what the uniting churches have in their “statements of faith” which were all adopted as the “heritage of faith” of the new Church. A case in point is the acceptance of three different forms of ecclesiastical governance: the Episcopal or the rule of the Bishop, the Congregational or the rule of the Congregation, and the Presbyterian or the rule of Elders with the practice of the Committee System. For almost a decade we did not have a Constitution except the Basis of Union. What stood as a written document was a compilation called *The Book of Common Worship and Government of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines*. The book included the Basis of Union and all the Confessions, Statements of Faith or Discipline of the uniting churches.<sup>3</sup>

Our foreparents had full trust in the work of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church. In a sense, they held on to “a principle which gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds [that is to] hold to Christ and for the rest be not totally uncommitted.”<sup>4</sup> True enough we were “elastic” in interpretations of the faith and in ecclesiastical practices but held on to the first Christian confession: “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; I Cor. 12:3) and slowly moved towards a more unified understanding of faith and practice. Our first Statement of Faith came 38 years later, approved by the 1986 Novaliches General Assembly. The one that is currently used is the 1992 version issued by the Faith and Order Commission, officially accepted by the 2002 Baguio General Assembly for use in the churches and finally adopted by the 2006 General Assembly. This current official version contains the following article on the Church:

*We believe  
That the Church is the one body of Christ,  
the whole community of persons reconciled to God  
through Jesus Christ and entrusted with God’s ministry.  
(UCCP Statement of Faith, 1992)*

### **The Church as the Body of Christ**

This article on the Church brings with it rich Scriptural traditions accepted by all the uniting churches which by now have become “more” united. It is helpful to cite certain passages in John that have references to the Church such as those referring to the sheep and the sheepfold (John 10:10-18); the vine and the branches (John 15:1-12) and the high priestly prayer (John 17). But the most comprehensive and significant concept in the New Testament adopted by the United Church is the Church as *Body of Christ*. This image of the Church has a constellation of other images which are very significant in understanding the Church of Jesus Christ, such as the “head of the body” (Col. 1:18), the “one body and one spirit” (Eph 4:4), the “one body and many members” (I Cor. 12:12; Rom. 12:4-5), the “growth of the body” (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:16) and the “diversity of ministries in one body” (I Cor. 12:12-28), among many others.

### **Christ the Head of the Body**

In referring to the Church as the Body of Christ the immediate implication is that Christ is the Head. As Alfred J. Lindgren puts it: “The Christian Church rests solidly on the convictions that Christ founded the Church, is its head, and his resurrected living presence continue to direct the Church....The nature of the Church has been determined by Christ, its head, and by his gospel which the Church is called to proclaim.”<sup>5</sup>

Other metaphors on the dependence of the Church on Christ, the Head, are (1) Christ, the chief cornerstone and (2) the Vine and its branches. The writer of Ephesians likens the Church to the building of a temple.

*You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows in a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)*

Christ as cornerstone is laid at the juncture of the meeting of the two walls which are in utter dependence on the Cornerstone or else the whole building will collapse. In the metaphor of the Vine and its branches, Christ as the Vine indicates the utter dependence of the “branches” on Christ. The source of life of the branches is the Vine, and if they are cut off from the vine the branches die.

---

<sup>3</sup>See Enrique Sobrepeña, *That They May Be One* (Manile: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1954)

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Butterfield as cited by Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (Canada: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 87-103.

<sup>5</sup>Alvin Lindgren, *Foundations of Purposeful Church Administration* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 44.

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. (John 15:4-5a)*

As Leslie Newbigin puts it, “the church derives its character not from its membership but from its Head, not from those who join it but from Him who call it into being.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The Unity of the Church: One Body, Many Parts**

The concept of the Body of Christ points to the corporate unity of the Church (I Cor. 12). The Body and its many separate parts and varied functions speak of their inter-relatedness and inter-dependence. “For just as the body is one and has many members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were baptized into one body - Jews and Greeks, slaves and free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (I Cor. 12:12-13)

The concept of the Church as the Body of Christ includes the idea that all gifts are from God; all are to be used in serving Christ; and all are to be used for the common good. (I Cor. 12:4-7; Eph 4:11-13)

Corollary to this is the idea that the Church is the continuation of Christ’s ministry (1986 UCCP Statement of Faith). The nature of the ministry of the Church is derived from Christ (Luke 4:18-19). If the Church is to fulfill its nature it must be the body in which the living word of God’s love is found and Christ’s work and ministry expended in the world today. As such the ministry of the Church in the world is actually the ministry of Christ. Alan Richardson says:

*The Church is thus the means of Christ’s work in the world; it is his hands and feet, his mouth and voice. As in his incarnate life, Christ had to have a body to proclaim his gospel and do his work, so in his resurrection life in this age he still needs a body to be the instruments of his gospel and of his work in the world.*<sup>7</sup>

### **“Entrusted With God’s Ministry”**

Even as we say that the nature and ministry of the Church is derived from Christ, it is important to be reminded by the Faith and Order Commission, 1992 that the Church is only “entrusted with God’s ministry.” We need to understand the ministry of the Church in relation to the mission of God. God is the origin and owner of mission. As the eminent South African missiologist, David Bosch, puts it, *mission is not primarily an activity of the Church; but an attribute of God. God is [the] missionary*. We are only “entrusted with God’s ministry.” We do not own mission. In this sense the Church actually has no mission or ministry for the Church does not exist for itself. There is Church only because of the mission of God, the *missio dei*. David Bosch explains it this way:

*Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is Church because there is mission and not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is the fountain of sending love.*<sup>8</sup>

It is God who has mission. We are only instruments of God’s mission, participating in the movement of God’s love toward people and the world.

When the Church misinterprets mission, that is, acting as if it owns mission, or forgets mission, that is, acting like a religious club, existing for its own sake and doing things for its own good, the Church loses its reason for being. In such a situation, the Church becomes introvert, seeks only its own interest and often times fall into internal conflicts. The moment the Church fails to do the mission of God, it begins to die.

### **Growth of the Body**

The Church as the Body of Christ is a living organism rather than merely an organization. It grows like a cell. As Daniel Jenkins puts it, “The strange thing about the Church is not that it grows old, but that it seems to have discovered the secret of being born again.”<sup>9</sup>

This implies that the Church is composed of people, not mechanical robots. The Church considers people’s feelings and needs. This also implies that people have the capacity to change and be renewed.

---

<sup>6</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1953), 21.

<sup>7</sup>Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1958), 256.

<sup>8</sup>David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 390.

<sup>9</sup>Cited by Lindgren, *Foundation of Purposeful Church Administration*, 53.

## Fellowship of Redemptive Love

Our Statement of Faith says that the Church is “*the whole community of persons reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.*” In Lindgren’s language the Church is a “fellowship of redemptive love.” The Church as a reconciled and reconciling community is concerned with relationships: God to persons, persons to God and persons to persons. In baptism, we affirm the reconciling act of God in every person. And when we are baptized in the name of Christ, we are not only a new creature but we have become part of the “sisters” and “brothers” in the faith in a loving and reconciling fellowship. As such, the fellowship of the baptized becomes a redemptive community. This is evident in the New Testament Church such as Paul addressing or sending greetings to the “brothers” or “sisters” (Cf. Rom. 16:1-16; Gal. 6:1-2; Col. 4:7-17) where he encouraged them to strengthen each other in the faith: “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gifts to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” (Rom. 1:11-12) In the community of the reconciled or of redeeming love, members of the Church strengthen one another.

Paul addresses his letters “To those sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “called to be saints” (Cf. I Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2). The term “saints” refers to holiness of the Church, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Saints are born of the Spirit and baptized into one Spirit (I Cor. 12:13). Whenever the Church is spoken of as “The Saints,” the power of the Holy Spirit is assumed to be at work within it. Thus the life of the “saints” is at every point circumscribed by the Holy Spirit, and determined and empowered by it. In this “holiness” of sainthood lies the unity and power of the Church.<sup>10</sup> Such unity of fellowship enables the Church to be a ministering community to the world as each person is strengthened to be a witness for Christ as he/she goes about his/her vocation and daily tasks. The Christian fellowship (*koinonia*) binds the Church together as a witnessing community to minister in the world.

The unifying bond and source of the fellowship is not the mutual attraction of persons for one another but their common experience of the presence of the living Christ in their lives. In the familiar benediction “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you,” we find God as the source of the fellowship (*koinonia*) and through the Holy Spirit, the relationship of persons to God. Such fellowship then becomes a witness in the world.

### The “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ”

It is an act of faith for the UCCP Constitutional Convention of 1993 to trace the continuity of Church from the apostolic tradition originating from the Nicene Creed. Our new Constitution now includes the article: “The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is an *integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.*” (UCCP Constitution, 1993/94, Art. II, Sec. 1). These four words are referred to traditionally as the “marks of the church.”

Since this article is now part of the UCCP Constitution, it behooves us to discuss it in this chapter. It is unfortunate though that the concept of “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic” has been traditionally interpreted relating the Church to the concept of Christendom. As such, Christian movement has been tied to specific nations and empires and class systems of the Western world. There is, for example, a critique saying that the Church of Rome is a residue of the Roman Empire. Having discussed in the previous sections the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ, we will now look at the “marks of the Church” as it relates to its mission and ministry with particular emphasis on its relation with the current socio-cultural and economic situation in the world.

### Unity: “one...Church of Jesus Christ”

On the level of the congregation, in considering the “One...Church of Jesus Christ” we, as UCCP members, should be able to “hold to Christ,” following our fore-parents and keep our unity despite all the different interpretations of faith and practice. In Christ, the Church should be able to stay together despite the various political persuasions and economic standing of its members. In this situation, we might as well listen to Jesus himself on the idea of “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” in the *one Church of Jesus Christ* when he said that “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

---

<sup>10</sup>Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. See Chapter V, “The Fellowship of Faith.”

<sup>11</sup>Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (Canada: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 89-90.

On another level, can we confess to be “one...Church” and keep the “unity in Christ” despite all the denominational differences? As UCCP people, we take pride for having “united” five different Protestant traditions and even made compromises in faith expressions and practice for the sake of unity. We profess to be a “united and uniting Church” and continue to seek closer relationships with churches such as the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) and the UNIDA Ekyumenikal with whom we have written covenants.

Certainly, division in the Body of Christ is a scandal. But it is not enough for churches to “lament our tragic divisions.” For Douglas Hall “ecumenicity is not just an option; it is the minimum requirement of serious discipleship.” Consider the following:

*A Church, while not actively resisting the unity principle, was nevertheless content to live its own life in isolation from other “separated” brothers and sisters, fostering its own “denominational” enterprises, sustaining its own mission, assuming the rectitude and plenitude of its own forms of ministry, worship, and mission and never asking seriously whether such priorities were proper to disciples of Jesus Christ: such a church would also, surely, beg the question of its own authenticity.<sup>11</sup>*

Beyond the “denominational enterprise” and recognizing the presence of the Church in a pluralistic world, our Church (UCCP) has already considered the “other sheep that are not of this fold” (John 10:16) for a wider sense of unity when in our own Policy Statement Ecumenical Relations we said:

*The UCCP is open to the spirit of new ecumenism which goes beyond the traditional denominational lines. This new ecumenism has come out of the Church’s ministry and solidarity with the people’s struggle for justice, peace, and freedom. Its main objective is the restoration of the individual to full humanhood and the transformation of society to usher in the Kingdom of God. (UCCP Statement on Ecumenical Relations, 1986.)*

The concern expressed here is our “openness” to Living Faiths, and ideologies, especially in the common quest for “abundant life for all” recognizing the intension of God for universal reconciliation. Furthermore, the quest for unity goes beyond the human community. It moves us further into the unity of all Creation. As Romans 8:21 and 22 puts it, the whole creation is “groaning in travail” to be “set free from its bondage to decay...”

### **Holiness: “One, Holy....Church of Jesus Christ:”**

Holiness may be understood in two senses, one, holiness that refers to the dimension of the transcendence and mystery, that of the “otherness” of God, and two, the sense of being set apart.

In the first sense, *holiness* refers to the transcendence which the Church is conscious of. This is the sensitivity of the Church to the *Holy*, pointing to the power beyond itself, in Paul Tillich’s word, to “the ground of being.” In a world of science and technology where “secularization” seems to have prevailed, there is a need for the recovery of the sense of sacred. *Holiness* in the Church of Jesus Christ recovers the sense of longing of the human spirit for the depth and mystery of existence directing the Church to awesome presence of God.

In the second sense, *holiness* as a mark of the Church implies being set apart from the world. Douglas Hall says that the church’s holiness is the condition necessary for its witness to the justice of God. “So long as the Church is merely part of the social mix, it is difficult for it to represent anything to and within the world that is not part of it....The church’s holiness is the condition necessary to its witness to divine justice.<sup>12</sup>

Holiness, however, is not the making of the Church. It is conferred to the Church, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The idea brings us back to the call of the People of God in the Old Testament. Israel was not called to be a special people, favored by God. But Israel was chosen for the purpose of witnessing to the love of God to the world. The continuity of the Church call to be God’s people is explicit in the Letter of Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. (Peter 2:9-10)

The holiness of the Church is the basis for its deepest ethical commitment vis-à-vis the life of the world. It is in this sense that the UCCP adopts a theology of the Reign of God (Luke 4:18-19) and profess that “God is at work, to make its person a new being in Christ, and the whole world, God’s Kingdom –in which love, justice and peace prevail.” (Article 5 of the UCCP Statement of Faith)

---

<sup>12</sup>Hall, 93.

### **Catholicity: “One, Holy, Catholic...Church of Jesus Christ.”**

Catholic means “universal.” To believe the “one, holy, catholic Church” means to understand the essence of the universal character of the Church. To confess such universality as a mark of the Church is to deny that the Church belongs to any one culture, nation, people, race, gender, class, historical confederacy, hemisphere or world. It denies the idea of certain global community or groupings to virtually “own” the Church.

Such confession brings the Church in opposition to the “marginalization” of some sectors in the Church, particularly, the women, the youth, the differently-able, the sexual and political outcast, the un-churched and the indigenous peoples. The Church does not belong to any supposedly privileged group. It is for all who hear and are drawn to the gospel, and no one has any “right” to membership and leadership within the Christian community because of the accidents of birth! We ‘belong’ in the church solely and simply because of the grace of God.... God alone grants our membership in the Body of Christ, and God shows no partiality (Gal. 2:6; 3:23). In Christ we have all become children of God.

Catholicity, however, is not an accomplished reality. But it points the creation of a global community where “there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free person, but Christ is all, and in all. (Col. 3:11). The end of this process is the Reign of God.

### **Apostolicity: True to Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ**

Apostolicity contains two distinct but related implications. The first is the continuity of the “true church” with the tradition of the apostles and second relates to the meaning of “apostle” itself “to send forth.”

The Church is not whatever anyone decides it to be for we are inheritors of a tradition even to the non-Jew. The author of the Ephesians told his non-Jewish congregation that their gentile congregation has been

*built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.... (Eph. 2:11, 3:1)*

What has been handed down has to be appropriated in whatever nation, race, clan or community that calls itself a Christian Church.

A second understanding of apostolicity is that the message passed on by the apostles is ever in need of finding new voices to announce it. The apostle is one who is “sent forth” not aimlessly but for definite purpose, that is, the mission of God in Christ. The apostolic community is a messenger-community, the bearer of the good news. It is in this concept that the Church is mission. It is the nature of the Church to be missionary. Apostolicity mandates the Church to be in continuous movement of bringing the good news to the world.

In sum, the two understanding of apostolicity can be put in a joint thought that the church exists for the sake of the message that it bears, namely, the message entrusted to the original apostles, and which must continually be proclaimed by new messengers.

### **The Church as Household of God**

An apt image and concept of the community of the reconciled and redemptive love which may be better understood in the Filipino context is the *Household of God* (Hebrews 3:1-6; I Peter 4:17). The image of the *household* has its own constellation of images such as “house,” “nation,” “race,” “priesthood,” “people,” (I Peter 2:5-10), “one father who is in heaven” (Matt. 23:9), “children of God” (John 1:12), “brotherhood [sisterhood]” (I Peter 2:17).

The concept of the Household of God can be traced back in the Old Testament Covenant where Israel is the “son of God.” The Covenant was recognition of the reality of a true communion between God and people. God, the Holy One, has established and continues to guide this relationship. As such the community of faith is not merely a human community but the Community of God. The concept of the Household of God is related to the central concept of the Church as the People of God. The Covenant is God’s gift for it is God’s doing, not the people’s. The people’s part in the covenant is that of response to God’s initiative. The community of faith was established with the responsibility to express the will and the reign of God.

Connecting the Old Testament Covenant idea, the writer of Hebrews speaks of Moses as “builder of a house” but “the builder of all things is God.” Moses is the faithful servant “but Christ was faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are [God’s] house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope” (Hebrews 3:5-6).

The Covenant of the People of God calls for special responsibility: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from dungeons, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” (Isaiah 42:5-7)

Such responsibility of the people of God was accepted by the early Christians as theirs, as heirs of the Covenant. Even the heart of the creed of Israel was given to Jesus and in turn was given to the Church:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Deut. 6:4; Lev. 19:18 cf. Mark 12:29-31)*

The early Christians thought of themselves as the new people of God because in the ministry of Jesus they saw that he was the one sent to fulfill the hope of Israel for a revitalized community of the covenant. This covenant is intended for all people. God's Household is designed to embrace all people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. The life of the family is solely grounded in God who is called "Father" (Matt. 23:9). In the New Testament, being a child in the Household of God is a fruit of the mission of Christ through "whom comes the power to be children of God." (John 1:12). Everyone in the Household of God are "brothers" and "sisters." For "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35.)

### **Concluding Words**

The image of the Household of God is appropriately Filipino. I suggest that it be used as a primary image in Filipino understanding the Church of Jesus Christ. For in the traditional Filipino Household all are included: the grandparents, the children, the grand children, even to the extent of literally living in one house. The traditional Filipino family is an extended community with relatives sometimes of several generations. Filipino family values are learned or caught in the family. There is an inner cohesiveness in this community which is expressed in the interdependence in the whole community. In many cases, the UCCP local churches are literally family or clan churches.

It is interesting to note that in the Hebrew concept, the household or the family of Israel refers to all people where "all the *families* of the earth" belongs (Gen. 28:14; Ephesians 2:19). Here is a Biblical image of all peoples belonging to God. As such, the Church as Household of God is an "extended family" in the Filipino sense. The *oikoumene* (the whole inhabited world) takes on a special meaning. The Church as *oikoumene* welcomes all peoples from every tribe, tongue and nation into the *koinonia* with God, where everyone is brother and sister to one another under the parenthood of God.

### **References**

- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. New York:Orbis Books, 1993.
- Hall, Douglas John. *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* Canada: The United Church Publishing House, 1989.
- Lindgren, Alvin. *Foundations of Purposeful Church Administration*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1965.
- Miner, Paul S. *The Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *Household of God*. New York: Friendship Press, 1953.
- Richardson, Alan. *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1958.
- Sitoy, T. Valentino Jr. *Several Springs, One Stream*, Vol. I. Quezon City: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1992.
- Sobrepeña, Enrique. *That They May Be One*. Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1954.
- UCCP Constitution and By Laws*, 1996.

# Kingdom of God: Its Centrality in the Scripture

Reuel Norman O. Marigza

Kingdom of God, also known as the Kingdom of Christ, Kingdom of Heaven or Reign/Rule of God, is definitely a central theme of the Scriptures. Listen to how it is described:

“The kingdom of God is a key thread in Scripture, tying the whole Bible together. It is not the only unifying theme, nor should it replace other themes which are clearly biblical. Yet it is critically important theme, especially today. And its recent resurgence in the church is, I believe, one of the most significant developments of this century.” - *Howard Snyder*<sup>1</sup>

“The Messianic kingdom is not only the main theme of Jesus’ preaching it is the central category unifying biblical revelation.” - *Richard Lovelace*<sup>2</sup>

“The concept of the kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible. . . To grasp what is meant by the Kingdom of God is to come very close to the heart of the Bible’s gospel of salvation.” - *John Bright*<sup>3</sup>

Jesus message “was the Kingdom of God. It was the center and circumference of all He taught and did...The Kingdom of God is the master-conception, the master-plan, the master purpose, the master-will that gathers everything up into itself and gives it redemption, coherence, purpose and goal.” -*E. Stanley Jones*<sup>4</sup>

## Some Biblical Data and Definitions<sup>5</sup>

### Occurrence

We can see that by sheer volume of citations alone, “the kingdom of God” is a central concept or a key theme. The term “kingdom of God” occurs four times in Matthew (12:28; 19:24; 21:31; 21:43), fourteen times in Mark, thirty-two times in Luke, twice in John (3:3, 5), six times in Acts, eight times in Paul, once in Revelation (12:10).

“The kingdom of the heavens” occurs thirty-three times in Matthew, once in a variant reading in John 3:5. “Kingdom” occurs nine times (e.g., Matt. 25:34; Luke 12:32; 22:29; I Cor. 15:24; Rev. 1:9); also “thy kingdom” (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:10); “his kingdom” (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31; I Thess. 2:12); “the kingdom of their [my] Father” (Matt. 13:43; 26:29); “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:19); “the sons of the kingdom” (Matt. 8:12; 13:38); “the kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10). Twice “kingdom” is used of the redeemed (Rev. 1:6; 5:9).

“The kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of the heavens” are linguistic variations of the same idea. Jewish idiom often substituted a suitable term for deity (Luke 15:21; Matt. 21:25; Mark 14:61; I Macc. 3:50). Matthew preserved the Semitic idiom while the other Gospels render it into idiomatic Greek. See Matt. 19:23-24 for their identity of meaning.

The kingdom of God is also the kingdom of Christ. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of the Son of man (Matt. 13:41; 16:28), “my kingdom” (Luke 22:30; John 18:36). See “his kingdom” (Luke 1:33; II Tim. 4:1); “thy kingdom” (Matt. 20:31; Luke 23:42; Heb. 1:8); “the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13); “his heavenly kingdom” (II Tim. 4:18); “the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Pet. 1:11). God has given the kingdom to Christ (Luke 22:29), and when the Son has accomplished his rule, he will restore the kingdom to the Father (I Cor. 15:24). Therefore the “the kingdom of the world is to become “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15). There is no tension between “the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ” (Rev. 12:10).

---

<sup>1</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *A Kingdom Manifesto: Calling the Church to Live Under God’s Reign* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 12

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 12-13

<sup>3</sup>John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 7

<sup>4</sup>Snyder, 13

<sup>5</sup>This section is largely culled from W.E. Vine’s “Vine’s Expository Dictionary of the New Testament Words” and “Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words” in *The Bible Library CD-ROM Disc* (Oklahoma: Ellis Enterprises Inc.)



## Usage of the Term

**The Secular Use.** The English word translated as “kingdom,” comes from the Greek word “*basileia*,” which is first, the authority to rule as a king and secondly, the realm over which the reign is exercised.

**The Abstract Meaning.** In Luke 19:12, 15 a nobleman went into a far country to receive a “kingdom,” i.e., authority to rule. Rev. 17:12 speaks of ten kings who have not yet received a “kingdom”; they are to “receive authority as kings” for one hour. These kings give over their “kingdom,” their authority, to the Beast (Rev. 17:17). The harlot is the great city which has “kingdom,” dominion over the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:18).

**The Concrete Meaning.** The kingdom is also a realm over which a reign is exercised. The idea of a realm is found in Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5; Matt. 24:7; Mark 6:23; Rev. 16:10.

The Vine’s Greek Dictionary concurs with the G. E. Ladd’s usage above when it stated that *basileia* is “primarily an abstract noun, denoting ‘sovereignty, royal power, dominion,’ e.g., Rev. 17:18, translated ‘(which) reigneth,’ lit., ‘hath a kingdom’ (RV marg.).” But it is “also a concrete noun, denoting the territory or people over whom a king rules, e.g., Matt. 4:8; Mark 3:24.”

The “kingdom of God,” therefore, means primarily the rule of God, the divine kingly authority.

**Old Testament Usage.** The Hebrew word *malekut* [or *malkut*], like *basileia*, carries primarily the abstract rather than the concrete meaning. A king’s reign is frequently dated by the phrase “in the...year of this *malekut*,” i.e., of his reign (I Chr. 26:31; Dan. 1:1). The establishment of Solomon’s *malekut* (I Kings 2:12) meant the securing of his reign. The reception of Saul’s *malekut* by David (I Chr. 12:23) is the authority to reign as king. The abstract idea is evident when the word is placed in parallelism with such abstract concepts as power, might, glory, dominion (Dan. 2:37; 4:34; 7:14).

When *malekut* is used of God, it almost always refers to his authority or his rule as the heavenly King. See Pss. 22:28; 103:19; 145:11, 13; Obad. 21; Dan. 6:26.

**Usage of *Basileia* in the New Testament.** Likewise, the kingdom of God is the divine authority and rule given by the God to the Son (Luke 22:29). Jesus Christ will exercise this rule until he has subdued all that is hostile to God. When he has put all enemies under his feet, he will return the kingdom, his messianic authority, to God the Parent (I Cor. 15:24-28). The kingdom (not kingdoms) now exercised by human beings in opposition to God is to become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ (Rev. 11:15) and “he shall reign for ever and ever.”

This abstract meaning is apparent in the Gospels. In Luke 1:33 the everlasting kingdom of Jesus Christ is synonymous with his rule. When Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36), he did not refer to his realm; he meant that his rule was not derived from earthly authority but from God and that his reign would not manifest itself like a human kingdom but in accordance with the divine purpose. The kingdom which people must receive with childlike simplicity (Mark 10:15; Matt. 19:14; Luke 18:17), which people must seek (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31), which Christ will give to the disciples (Luke 22:29), is the divine rule.

## Four Affirmations on the Kingdom of God

### The Kingdom of God is a mystery.

Theologians often speak of the paradox of the “here and still-to-come;” “the now and the not-yet” dimensions of the Kingdom. It is both present and future, both earthly and heavenly, both hidden and becoming manifest. It is here now! Jesus Christ’s first recorded message was simple and forthright: “The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). He also said, “... Behold, the Kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17: 21). Yet we also believe and do declare that there is a final consummation - when God’s “Kingdom come” and God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10); when “the kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” where “He shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). In that future time, often described as ‘the end of the age,’ Christ will judge on the throne, where the righteous shall inherit the Kingdom (Matt. 25: 31-46; specifically v. 34).

Jesus talks of the Kingdom as a “mystery.” In Mark 4: 11, He said: “To you has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables.” Many of the parables then contain a clue on the Kingdom.

One of the parables that Jesus used was that of the leaven. Again Jesus said, “To what will I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened.” (Matt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20-21). Notes William Barclay, “Almost all scholars would agree that it speaks of the transforming

power of Christ and of his Kingdom in the life of the individual and of the world; but there is a difference of opinion as to how that transforming power works.”<sup>6</sup>

Barclay then went on to say: In those days bread was baked at home. Leaven was a little piece of dough which had been kept over from the last baking and had fermented in the keeping. Leaven is regularly used in Jewish thought for influence.

There are two interpretations of this parable. From the first the following points emerge.

- (i) The kingdom of God starts from the smallest beginnings. Though very small, the leaven changed the whole character of the dough. One can make a difference. The kingdom of heaven starts from the dedicated lives of individual men and women.
- (ii) The kingdom of God works unseen. We do not see the leaven working but all the time it is fulfilling its function. Likewise, we cannot see the work of the Kingdom, but it is always working and drawing people and the world ever nearer to God.
- (iii) In Jesus Christ and the gospel a new force has been let loose in the world, and that, silently but inevitably, that force is working for righteousness in the world and God indeed is working the divine purpose.
- (iv) The kingdom of God works from inside. As long as the leaven was outside the dough it was powerless to help; it had to get right inside and to penetrate. Like the salt, it has to be rubbed on the meat, to prevent it from spoiling.
- (v) The power of the kingdom comes from outside. The dough had no power to change itself. To change life we need a power outside and beyond us.

The second interpretation, as proposed by C. H. Dodd, is the very opposite of this – that is, the working of the Kingdom can be plainly seen. Put the leaven into the dough, and the leaven changes the dough from a passive lump into a seething, bubbling, heaving mass. Just so the working of the Kingdom is a violent and disturbing force plain for all to see. When Christianity came to Thessalonica the cry was: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.” (Act 17:6) The action of Christianity is disruptive, disturbing, violent in its effect.

True religion is never a dope; never sends people comfortably to sleep; never makes them placidly accept the evils that should be striven against. The kingdom of heaven is the leaven which fills a person with the divine discontent that will not rest until the evils of earth are swept away by the changing, transforming and revolutionizing power of God. Christianity, if it is true to its calling, desires to take both persons and society and transform them.

Barclay concludes by saying: We do not need to choose between these two views of the parable, because they are both true. There is a sense in which the Kingdom, is always working, whether or not we see that work; and there is a sense in which it is plain to see. Many an individual life is manifestly and violently changed by Christ; and at the same time there is the silent operation of the purposes of God in the long road of history.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Kingdom of God is God’s Project**

As the dynamic activity of God’s rule, the kingdom is supernatural. It is God’s deed. Only the act of God can destroy Satan, defeat death (I Cor. 15:26), raise the dead in incorruptible bodies to inherit the blessings of the kingdom (I Cor. 15:50ff.), and transform the world order (Matt. 19:28).

The same supernatural rule of God is at work to deliver people from bondage. The parable of the seed growing by itself sets forth this truth (Mark 4:26-29). The ground brings forth fruit of itself. People may sow the seed by preaching the kingdom (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9; Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31); they can persuade people concerning the kingdom (Acts 19:8), but they cannot build it. It is God’s deed. People can receive the kingdom (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17), but they are never said to establish it. People can reject the kingdom and refuse to receive it or enter it (Matt. 23:13), but they cannot destroy it. They can look for it (Luke 23:51), pray for its coming (Matt. 6:10), and seek it (Matt. 6:33), but they cannot bring it. The kingdom is altogether God’s deed although it works in and through people. They may do things for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12; Luke 18:29), work for it (Col. 4:11), suffer for it (II Thess. 1:5), but they are not said to act upon the kingdom itself. They can inherit it (Matt. 25:34; I Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50), but they cannot bestow it upon others.

---

<sup>6</sup>William Barclay, “The Gospel of Mark” in the *Daily Study Bible Series*, Rev. Ed (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## **The Kingdom of God is not a human project.**

When the prophet Zechariah was shown several visions, including the coming of many nations to the Lord and their becoming God's people with God dwelling with them (Zech 2:10-11); or of the vision that people will be inviting one another to sit under one's own vine and fig tree (Zech 3:9-10), the prophet must have wondered how these things might be brought about. The word that came to him to convey to the leaders of the Remnant was: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord of hosts." (Zech. 4:6)

What God was saying, in effect, was that these things will not come through the "normal" or "usual" human effort of kingdom-building, like the use of military prowess or conquest, but by God's power. It was God's mighty hand that brought mighty Egypt to its knees. Other empires discovered the same, they have been weighed and have been found wanting.

But it should also be said here that even the chosen people of God were not exempted from coming under the judgment of God. Their being the chosen ones did not exempt them from living out the values of the Kingdom of God whose foundations are justice and righteousness and whose fruit is peace without end (Isa. 9:7). Note that this verse carries the pronouncement that 'it is the zeal of the Lord that will accomplish this.'

A look at the pages of history will show that nations and kingdoms have tried to put the imprimatur of God in their national causes and agenda; including their conquest of other people. It seemed important to be able to say that 'our cause is righteous and God is on our side.' But as someone has so wisely pointed out, it is not so much a question of whether God is on our side or not. The proper question is whether or not we are on God's side.

The Crusade was an attempt to recapture the Holy Land from the "infidels" — a move by Christian kingdoms to wrest control from the Muslims, but at what cost. To these days, the Crusades are pointed out as a tragic case of how human beings have tried on their own power and might to bring about the Kingdom.

We need not look very far for examples. The U.S.A., believing that it was by God's Providence for them to occupy the Philippines, to Christianize, and to 'civilize and uplift up,' nevertheless had to wipe out hundreds of thousands of Filipinos in the three short years of Philippine-American War. In fact, they did not even consider the cause our ancestors were fighting as a legitimate (i.e., war), but only a part of the pacification effort against the "insurgents and bandits."<sup>8</sup>

Even the church has, at one point, toyed with the idea of "Christendom," or of its desire to put up and revive the Holy Roman Empire. One can find the worst periods of church history when the church cavorted with, or outright attempted to direct world powers. Yancey, the editor-at-large of the evangelical publication, *Christianity Today*, noted in his book: History shows that when the Church uses the tools of the world's kingdom, it becomes ineffectual, or as tyrannical, as any other power structure. And whenever the church has intermingled with the state, the appeal of the faith suffers as well.

What we must stress under this affirmation, that the Kingdom of God is not a human project, is that we should not identify the Kingdom with any human institution, system and ideology. All human systems, institutions and ideologies — be it monopoly capitalism, globalization, free-market economy, fascism, monarchy, democracy, Islamic or Christian fundamentalism, socialism, communism, etc., etc., all stand and fall under the judgment of God in Christ, the Sovereign Lord of life and history. The kingdoms of this world must be judged with the values of the Kingdom of God, such as that of justice, righteousness, compassion and peace.

One system might be better than another, and by necessity, we must choose prudently and advocate which one is best for us. However, we should be cautioned that even the best one carries the fallenness of humanity and so we must be careful not to make it an absolute.

## **God Works Out the Divine Will Through Human Beings and Institutions**

As already alluded above, while the Kingdom is a God's project, God often uses human instrumentalities to work out the divine purpose and will. God called Moses to liberate God's people from Egypt. God has chosen and formed the nation of Israel as a way to demonstrate the divine love and intention. God has called the church "to proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). The risen Christ commissioned the followers to go out into the world and preach the good news and to teach all things Jesus has commended them (Mat. 28:19-20).

---

<sup>8</sup> Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916: An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986). See also Teodoro A. Agoncillo's *History of the Pilipino People*.

As we enter Christ's Kingdom, we become new creatures, the old things have passed away, behold, new things have come (2 Cor. 5:17). As such we are no longer to conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, that we might prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2). Thus, Jesus would say, "The kingdom of God is within (among) you." (Luke 17:20-21, NRSV)

We are called to be salt and light of the world — staving off society's decay and driving out the darkness (Mat. 5:13-20).

To the extent that human systems and ideologies reflect and manifest the kingdom's values, we must support them. We must ask the question, "which of these systems or ideologies best approximate the kingdom of God?" Thus, we should not be afraid to work together and cooperate with them in so far as there is convergence of aims and purpose. As the UCCP Statement of Evangelism in 1971 puts it, "Participating in human development and nation-building is the Christian's witnessing life. As Christians, our earthly citizenship should be a manifestation of our citizenship of the Kingdom of God... We are to be deeply involved in the ongoing social process of needed changes in our society and nation..."

Christians are to take part in the transformation of the world. We cannot and should not escape from the world. Christ did not pray for us to be taken out of this world but to be kept from the evil one (John 17:15). Christians possess a kind of dual citizenship. Yancey notes that in Jesus command, 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's,' Jesus pointed out the fundamental tension that often results. For the early Christians, loyalty to God's Kingdom sometimes meant a fatal clash with Caesar's visible kingdom."

From the pages of church history, the continuing saga of Christians making a tremendous dent to this world's kingdoms can be noted. Shall I speak of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect that eventually worked out the abolition of slavery in England? Or, of Martin Luther King Jr., marching in the streets to assert that all are created in the image of God? In recent times, we speak of the likes of a Desmond Tutu or a Nelson Mandela. Many of them, at the time when they were in the thick of these transformative acts, were persecuted, harassed, labeled with all sorts of labels and tags. Yet, the world is a much better world now because of their witness. The nations which at first persecuted them, now even have days in their honor; some have even gained world recognition.

### **The UCCP Statement of Faith on the Kingdom of God**

As a fitting conclusion to our study, let us take a look at the UCCP Statement of Faith and see how it has stated the various things we discussed. The United Church of Christ in the Philippines, in its Statement of Faith, declares and affirms its adherence to the reign/kingdom of God in the following sections:

First Article: The supremacy of Jesus Christ is upheld. Christ is acknowledged as "Sovereign Lord of life and history."

Fifth Article: The Primary Mover as well as the Locus of the Kingdom.

"We believe God is at work to make each person a new being in Christ, and the whole world, God's kingdom - in which love, justice and peace prevail.

*The kingdom of God is present*

*where faith in Jesus Christ is shared,*

*where healing is given to the sick,*

*where food is given to the hungry,*

*where light is given to the blind,*

*and where liberty is given to the captive and the oppressed."*

Sixth Article: Our Declaration of our Christian Hope.

"...we look forward to His (Christ) coming again in all fullness and glory to make all creation new and to gather all the faithful under God's kingdom."

Second Article: The Mandate for Kingdom-Building. That persons,

"being entrusted with God's creation," are "called to participate in the establishment of a just and compassionate social order."

### **References and Resources for Further Reading**

Barclay, William. "The Gospel of Mark" in the *Daily Study Bible Series*, Rev. Ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975

Snyder, Howard. *A Kingdom Manifesto: Calling the Church to Live Under God's Reign*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985

Vine, W.E. "Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words" in *The Bible Library CD- Rom Disc*. Oklahoma: Ellis Enterprises Inc., 1988

"Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words" in *The Bible Library CD-Rom Disc*. Oklahoma: Ellis Enterprises Inc., 1988

Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995

## **The Inclusivity of the Kingdom of God**

### **Hope S. Antone**

#### **We Believe...**

That God is at work to make each person a new being in Christ,  
and the whole world, God's Kingdom in which love, justice  
and peace prevail.

That the Kingdom of God is present  
where faith in Jesus Christ is shared,  
where healing is given to the sick,  
where food is given to the hungry,  
where light is given to the blind, and  
where liberty is given to the captive and oppressed.

*(From the UCCP Statement of Faith)*

#### **1. Why the Kingdom of God?**

Many Filipinos today are probably like me who cannot imagine what it is like to literally live in a kingdom. My ideas about living in royalty come from reading fairy-tale stories as a young child and then moving on to romantic novels about royalty falling in love with ordinary women when I was a teenager. Today, we know a bit more of the real stories about royalty in various parts of the world, which are far from being rosy or grand. We also experience the impact of empire building schemes that the more powerful countries are engaged in all over the world. It is no wonder that many Filipinos and other people of the world are very critical of the notions of kingdom and empire.

Yet, Jesus must have had a reason for using the metaphor of the *kingdom of God* or *kingdom of heaven*, when he announced it at the start of his ministry:

"The right time has come, and the *Kingdom of God* is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:15)

"Turn away from your sins, because the *Kingdom of heaven* is near!" (Matthew 4:17)

Basically a political metaphor, the concept of kingdom points to God as ruler of history and the universe, the One who protects and liberates people from pain, injustice, oppression, and suffering. If the earthly king, often believed to be anointed by God's prophets, was expected to protect and liberate the people, how much more would God do as the ultimate ruler of the universe? The metaphor also conveys an assurance that God has the final say even when circumstances in life seem to indicate otherwise.

I believe that Jesus used this image to point to *an alternative* to the kingdom and empire in and of the world that was known to the people as oppressive, enslaving, and dehumanizing. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God was therefore a judgment or condemnation of the kingdom/empire of the world. It was a counter-proposal to what was being experienced by the people at that time.

#### **2. What is the Kingdom of God like?**

Although the UCCP Statement of Faith uses "kingdom of God", which is a biblical word, many Christians prefer to use the word "reign of God" which connotes not so much a geographical space of dominion but a kind of

relationship between God and humanity and all creation. Feminist Christians who affirm that God created women and men in God's own image prefer the word *kindom*, which reflects a sense of kinship and familial affinity. Thus, it affirms the invisible but consistent presence of a gender-neutral God, who embraces female and male in God's very own image. Consequently, kinship, as in *kindom*, reflects a more egalitarian relationship – where people are valued equally and treated justly.

“See how much God has loved us! God's love is so great that we are called God's children – and so, in fact, we are.” (1 John 3:1)

The concept of God's reign was the major focus of Jesus' teaching (e.g. Mt 6:33; Mk 1:15; Lk 6:20). It has cosmic dimensions for it includes humanity and creation (the world). It also has an open sense of time – from the present into eschatology. It has a dynamic sense of realization – for it brings together the notion of “already and not yet.” Its fullness is in the future (e.g. Lk 13:29; 22:18) and yet it has also come in Jesus himself (e.g. Lk 10:9; 17:21). Thus, even if the reign of God is not yet fully realized, there is already the foretaste of its presence: love, justice and peace. These signify the presence of God's rule in the lives of people. For where there is love, justice and peace, there is God. Altogether, the reign of God presupposes social justice, freedom, fulfillment, healing, restoration, reconciliation, community, communality, and life.

Luke 4:18-19 gives a summary of what God's reign entails:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (English Standard Version)

These actions described will lead to the concept of *Shalom* – the state of wellbeing and wholeness which is for the whole community. In John 10:10b, Jesus described briefly the reason for his coming to the world: “I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness.”

What these passages remind us is that the coming of God's reign does not simply fall from heaven. It involves the doing of God's work, which was also Christ's work, and which is then passed on to the followers of Christ's way, for as Jesus said: “...whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will they do...” (John 14:12).

### **3. Is God's Reign (Kindom) Only for the Poor?**

Since the spread of liberation theology in the Third World countries (from Latin America, to Asia and Africa), the notion of “God's preferential option for the poor” has become an important slogan in theological circles. It has also become the catchword of the campaign for churches to be in solidarity with the poor, depressed, and oppressed peoples. But does this mean that God's reign is only for the poor? Is there no good news for the rich?

In the Bible are two categories of poor that Jesus blessed. From Luke's version we see the poor described as “poor”. These must have included the crowds of economically struggling people. They are those who have been *dispossessed* or forced to be poor under mammon's rule of terror. Conscious of their utter dependence on God, they hunger for righteousness and peace. Jesus had compassion for them as they were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). In a way, therefore, the reign of God belongs to the dispossessed poor because it is God's reign that seeks them. And when God's reign seeks them, they are empowered to denounce their enforced and enslaving poverty.

From Matthew's version, the poor are the “poor in spirit”. They may not have been materially poor, but they were conscious of their spiritual poverty, which could only be satisfied with God's help. Thus, dependent on God and hungry for righteousness and peace, they are those who are voluntarily detached from their riches. Jesus seemed to have taught that the renunciation of mammon is a basic qualification to enter and serve in God's reign (Matthew 19, also Luke 19). Even the cleansing of the temple was a clear renunciation of mammon's rule for the sake of God's reign (Luke 19:46). Therefore, for the rich who are poor in spirit, finding God's reign involves renouncing their riches and loyalty to mammon.

So there is no discrimination against the rich with God's preferential option for the poor. It is just that the poor have greater need than the rich. The reign of God is open to both the rich and the poor but it comes to them differently (i.e. with different demands) because of their different social locations. The church today faces the challenge to *struggle to be poor*, i.e. detached from the control of mammon; and to be *poor in spirit*, i.e. acknowledging its sinfulness and asking pardon from its victims. It also faces the challenge to *struggle for the poor*, by voluntarily being in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

#### 4. Is God's Reign (Kindom) Only for Christians?

Another question before us is whether the reign of God is an *exclusive possession* for Christians or an *inclusive possibility* for all people. Let us look closely at what our statement of faith as UCCP affirms:

“We believe that *God is at work*  
*to make each person a new being in Christ,*  
*and the whole world God's Kingdom*  
*in which love, justice and peace prevail.”*

This affirms that God's reign has both personal and social dimensions. Entry into God's reign involves transformation of oneself and one's relationships with all others around. This holistic view is rooted in the biblical vision of Shalom, the total wellbeing of people and the world.

What do we mean by “God is at work to make each person a new being in Christ”? Making each person a *new being* implies a transformation – being made new or being made whole again. We Christians believe that this is something we cannot do on our own – we need a savior to help it happen. And we believe that Christ Jesus is the Savior who can help us and lead the way. He is also the standard or model of what we can become. Being in Christ means being in the likeness of Christ, i.e. having the spirit and mindset of Christ. So it is more than the Christian or denominational label that we often attach to being a follower of Christ. If we only remember, Christ himself was not a Christian. He was a Jew who tried to transform his religion (i.e., to fulfill the law, as he used to say it).

There is an interesting story in the Bible about being made new or being made whole that goes deeper than simply taking on a religious label or a denominational badge. While the stronger voices in the Bible seem to portray that the native Canaanite people, and their religion and culture were being subsumed by the Jews and the Jewish religion and culture, Jesus is depicted affirming the faith of a Syrophenician or Canaanite woman (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). Being made into a new being in Christ goes far deeper than having the Christian or denominational label that many of us like to wear as a badge or wave around as a flag. Even Jesus was changed, also transformed, by the encounter with the woman.

That this is all God's work is also a humbling affirmation for us. We therefore can not claim credit for any transformed life, not even for our own life. This transformed life has implications for our understanding of conversion, which unfortunately has come to mean simply the changing of religious labels or moving from one church membership to another. Real transformation is the work of God – and if Christ is to be the measure, and gleaned from his teachings, it means becoming God-centered by being people-centered rather than remaining self-centered. So the process of becoming a new person in Christ is God's work. It is therefore not clearly or readily visible. It cannot be captured by our Christian or denominational label. Above all, it remains to be seen through the fruits of one's life.

What do we mean by “God is at work to make the whole world God's Kingdom in which love, justice and peace prevail”? We Christians affirm that because God created the world and everything that is in it, then nothing is outside of God's love and care – whether humankind, animals, plants, organisms, all matter, etc. But God entrusted the world to humankind. People are therefore stewards, or trustees, of everything in creation. Yet, we also know that the whole creation is groaning in pain (Romans 8:22), mostly due to human neglect, abuse or exploitation. As Christians, we affirm that God is working to make the world come under God's reign – i.e. the rule of love, justice and peace. This is a big task because today, the whole world has been put under the control of a profit-oriented ideology (globalization), which is highly supported by a war-oriented ideology (war on terror). If these two go unchallenged and unchecked, God's world will continue to suffer with gravely detrimental effects.

Implicit in our affirmation however is the belief that just as God has made human beings stewards of God's creation, God has also called them to be co-actors in the process of justice and peace building. Turning the whole world into God's reign of love, justice, and peace means confronting the powers and principalities that are hurting and distorting God's world. This is indeed a big task especially if we think that only Christians are called upon to participate in this work with God. But affirming that God is the God of the whole world and that the world is God's household, we can say with confidence that in fact God is calling on all peoples, God's children, to this task.

There is a beautiful story in the gospel according to Mark (9:38-40) about a man who was driving out demons in Christ's name. John informed Jesus that the disciples had told the man to stop because “he was not one of us”. But Jesus said, “Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.” The reign of God is for the whole world. Participating in its in-breaking is therefore for all God's children, regardless of their religion, ideology, race, gender, etc.

We may differ in our practices of faith as Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc. We may differ in our theologies as Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, etc. We may differ in our political leanings, e.g. as pro-people activists or government-abiding citizens, etc. We may differ in our social locations due to ethnicity, class, education, profession, etc. But we cannot let our differences divide us and destroy us. When we allow this to happen, the principalities and powers of this world will be more victorious in keeping us under their control. We therefore need to overcome our differences by remembering that God has entrusted God's world to all of us – for our sake and the sake of the generations to come. We need to overcome our differences by coming to terms with our prejudices about each other. Above all, we need to transcend our differences by working together for the sake of God's world that we share together.

## 5. Dealing with our Fears and Doubts about God's Inclusive Reign

Although there are passages that point to the inclusive reign/kingdom of God, there are also exclusive claims that have shaped our thinking and have prevented us from meaningfully relating with people who are 'other' to us. Especially in terms of faith, we Christians hold certain truth claims that we feel should not be compromised. These have become our non-negotiable core. Since our truth claims are usually in opposition to the truth claims of believers of other faiths, they tend to lead to tension and animosity. Among the truth claims that we uphold are absolute statements about God and the "I am" sayings of Jesus found in the gospel according to John.

The Ten Commandments clearly declare absolute statements by God:

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before (besides) me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand (generations) of those who love me and keep my commandments."* (Exodus 20:2-6)

At a time when Judaism (i.e. monotheism) was new on the scene, the commandments were a strong encouragement to the people in the face of many other competing religious systems. Unfortunately, today, our tendency as Christians is to find fault in other religions that allow images and icons in their sanctuaries without even fully knowing the place of such things in their practice and belief. Talking with some believers from the other faith communities (including certain Christian denominations), I have learned that they do not actually worship those images or icons – but that they are helps or aids in their worship and practice. Unfortunately also we forget to see the idols that we ourselves create, especially when they do not take the shape of graven images or material things. We do have idols – those that take the place of God and to which we ascribe absolute authority and our utmost loyalty. They are however not readily visible because they can be ourselves, our business or career, our nationalism, our ideology, or our religion. Thankfully, from our experience of Christ, we have also come to know that God is not a spiteful, jealous and punitive God who punishes us through the third and fourth generations for going astray – but that God is more like a patient parent, ever waiting for the prodigal children to return home.

Additionally, many Christians have also taken the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the gospel according to John as carrying absolute claims that just cannot be compromised:

*"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst (Jn. 6:35)... I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh"* (Jn. 6:51).

*"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (Jn. 8:12).

*"I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (Jn. 10:9)... I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* (Jn. 10:11).

*"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (Jn. 11:25).

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me"* (Jn. 14:6).

*"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"* (Jn. 15:5).

Linguistically, these sentences use metaphor, a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison. Since metaphor is symbolic language, readers must remember that there are at least two layers of meaning: the *historically literal* and the *symbolic*.



Written in Koine Greek, the fourth gospel account must have been written with the awareness of the symbolism and significance of the metaphor in such a language. Furthermore, when comparing John's account of the gospel with the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke), there are clear differences. According to some scholars, the fourth account may be thought of as a *painting* of Jesus' life and teachings, which is subjectively intended to bring out and highlight the texture and underlying meaning of Jesus' life and teachings. Whereas, scholars say, the synoptic gospels are more like *photographs* that somewhat objectively record events but with less opportunity to interpret.

The "I am" sayings are usually seen in parallel to the wording in Exodus 3:14, "*Ego eimi ho on*". Usually translated as "I AM THAT I AM" or "I AM WHO I AM", it could also be translated as "I am the Being." Some scholars suggest that the phrase can also be seen in the light of Genesis 1:26-27, where God created the human being in God's "image" and "likeness." If so, Jesus' words representing the "I am" (God's image or likeness) take on a very significant meaning. Additionally, Christ Jesus is several times referred to as the "image" or "likeness" of God (2 Co 4:4, Col 1:15, Heb 1:3) and, interestingly, through Christ, "we" are also referred to as the image of God (Rom 8:29, 1 Co 15:49, 2 Co 3:18, Col 3:10).

The *truth claims* we hold about Christ and, consequently, of our faith, should not be taken as equal to the *Truth*, which is God, who we continuously seek to grasp and discern. God who is absolute truth is much wider, much bigger, and much greater than what we can ever fathom or conceive. This should humble us so that we should guard against boxing God with our preconceived ideas and our self-serving desire to protect ourselves and our faith.

We must also remember that truth claims are generally articulated in love language. For it was from their out-flowing of love that early followers of Christ came up with the hymn:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
(*Philippians 2:9-11, cf. Romans 14:11, Isaiah 45:23*)

It was also from their out-flowing of love and gratitude that the disciples of Christ humbly attributed to Jesus their ability to heal a cripple. They were simply affirming that Jesus was the real Savior, not they or anyone else who claimed to be the messiah (and there were many who did that just as there are still who do today):

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

This love language is for the members of our community of faith in order to encourage one another in our faith. We cannot and should not expect however that other communities of faith would affirm the same with us. Instead they will also have their own love language for those who also guide them on their journey of faith and life.

If the different religions are part of God's order of things, is there still a place for mission?

Yes, definitely. However, in view of the fact that Christianity is a minority religion among several other older and well established religions in Asia, we have to re-visit our mission thinking and practice. We have to realize that much of our mission thinking and practice today follows a conquest approach, which is but a legacy from our colonial history. Just as the colonizers came to conquer with the sword and gun, the early Christian missionaries who came alongside them did so with the cross and the Bible. We have to retrieve the radical (original or root) purpose of the mission of Jesus as when he sent out his disciples to bring peace, heal the sick, announce that the reign of God is near (Luke 10:5, 9), preach repentance, drive out demons, and anoint and heal the sick (Mark 6:12). Or, as our Statement of Faith implicitly puts it, our mission is to continue Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God:

(And) the Kingdom (or reign) of God is present  
where faith in Jesus Christ is shared,  
where healing is given to the sick,  
where food is given to the hungry,  
where light is given to the blind, and  
where liberty is given to the captive and oppressed.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus announced the start of his ministry (Luke 4:14-20) by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, all spoke well of him and were amazed at his words. They must have been happy to hear that the scripture was going to be fulfilled in their hearing (vs 21) – the Messiah at last, revealing himself and declaring

his mission. Then Jesus spoke of prophets being rejected in their hometown (vs 24); of prophet Elijah being sent not to the Israelite widows but to a widow of Zarephath in Sidon (vs 26); of Elisha cleansing a Syrian leper Naaman when there were many Israelite lepers around (vs 27). After hearing this, the people who earlier had marveled at his teaching now got up, drove him out of the town and led him to the brow of the hill to hurl him off the cliff (vs 29).

What does this say about the inclusivity of God's kingdom/reign?

We cannot keep it to ourselves for it is not only for us – it is for all in God's creation. And this is why it makes so much sense that the story of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) depicts how those who have helped the least of God's people in their most basic needs, regardless of religious or denominational labels, are commended for their righteousness. In the end, this must be the very meaning of being made a new *being in Christ* and of actively participating in the in-breaking of God's reign in God's world.

So can the reign of God be equated with ideologies or with movements working for social change based on certain ideologies?

The desire for social change is not a monopoly of Christians with their vision of the reign of God. It is also true of people's movements and civil society groups, which may not be inspired by faith or religion but by certain ideologies. Although there are groups that have very clearly declared they are for non-violent resistance, in many instances they are being pushed against the wall and to change direction. No matter how it is rationalized, however, violent struggle in an already violent context, whether it is really the last resort or not, is sure to escalate violence.

Definitely, the ideologies of the movements working for social change cannot be equated with the reign of God, just as the theologies of Christians also cannot be equated with the reign of God. As Jesus had taught, the arrival of God's reign is not something of our own making as if we already possess a clear blueprint for it to be realized. We cannot force the coming of God's reign (Matthew 11:12) for it is like the seed that grows of itself (Mark 4:26ff). We cannot use our own standards and strategies (Matthew 13:24ff) to ensure its growth. We therefore cannot and should not rely on our human efforts alone and forget God's own wondrous ways of grace. I think this is where the reign of God clearly differs from any political ideology – including the political ideology of US President Bush which is coated with religious language.

As our Statement of Faith affirms, it is God who is at work to make each person a new being in Christ, and the whole world, God's kingdom. We can participate in it and in fact we are called to participate in it. But, thankfully and humbly, we must affirm that it is really God's work.

## References

- Antone, Hope S. *Religious Education in Context of Plurality and Pluralism*. Manila: New Day Publishers and Hong Kong: CCA, 2003.
- Achtemeier, Paul J., ed. *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Harper San Francisco, 1996.
- Fabella, Virginia and R S Sugirtharajah, eds. *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000.
- McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- Peiris, Aloysius, "Catholicity of Oikoumene and Holiness Beyond the Church" in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (December 2003), 36-45.
- Roy, Arundhati. *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*. New Delhi, India: Penguin/Viking, 2005.
- Wilfred, Felix. "Our Neighbors and Our Christian Mission: Deconstructing Mission without Destroying the Gospel," in *The People of God Among All God's Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission*. Hong Kong: CCA and CWM, 2000.

# **The Resurrection**

**Levi V. Oracion**

“If Christ has not been raised,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.  
Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.  
If in this life we who are in Christ have only hope,  
we are of all men most to be pitied.”  
I Cor. 15: 16 – 19

## **The Human Quest**

Life is full of promise that surges within the human soul; and there are moments of extreme beauty and excitement that points to a world of joy, fulfillment and peace. But the realization of such promises cannot be had just for the asking. One has to struggle for them, a struggle that for most human beings seems to be never ending life long. So as the poet says, “Art is long and time is fleeting. . . “ And the fallenness of human beings makes the promises of life a taunting and painful mockery; and even if one wins the human quest for happiness and power death comes around too soon. “Death,” as St. Paul says, “is the ultimate enemy.” In fact, scientists tell us that even our sun, from which all power, life and light on earth arise, is already in the throes of death. Death is everywhere: it is in the faces of the poor ground to the dust by the machinations of the rich and the powerful. It is in the faces of children who have no future. It is in the faces of soldiers as they go to battle to maim and kill — or to be maimed and killed. It is in the agony of creation as it groans in travail reeling under the drive for profit and power by the high and the mighty. In the Bible, the book that agonizingly articulates the tragic character of life is Ecclesiastes whose writer declares that there is nothing meaningful “under the sun.”

The God of the Bible declares that God is the creator of all things, and that God is bound neither by space nor time. The eternal being of God is the answer to the being unto death of all creation, for God can bring forth life — the abundant life — out of the finality of death. But what about the finitude of human beings? Their vast, deep and incurable sinfulness make the exciting promises of life ugly and perverse. All of these paralyzing questions are answered with finality in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **The Resurrection**

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, for Paul, is the bedrock of the truth and power of faith. Without it, the entire life, ministry and crucifixion of Jesus become pointless and get shorn of its power, truth and meaning. For Paul, the resurrection stands as the principal bedrock of faith inasmuch as it is the demonstration of Christ’s power over all things, including the last enemy death. In the work of Christ, Paul conceives of a battle royal between two contending cosmic forces: on one hand, are the forces under the command of Satan whose reason for being is to oppose God and subvert and destroy everything that God has created and is doing. They wield death as one of their weapons — ‘the last enemy’ according to Paul.

On the other hand are the forces of the followers of Christ, whose principal weapons are faith, hope and love. The final battleground between these two forces was the last days of Jesus — the passion week, where the Satan and Satan’s hordes, threw everything they had to destroy Jesus, till finally they decided to eliminate him physically through death by crucifixion. Elimination by death is the final weapon always resorted to by Satan and Satan’s cohorts, for death the absolute cessation of life for all of God’s creatures, and no one but those who life has become meaningless would welcome death. So the threat of death is served by the opponents of truth, justice and freedom to those who fight for them. Death is Satan’s last weapon; it is a fearsome weapon, and a great many human beings surrender to its demands. Satan and Satan’s cohorts know of its terrifying power, and they mete it out to their most resolute enemies. And among their enemies, Jesus was the most resolute. In their mind, the death of Jesus eliminates their most powerful enemy. This is how death is also understood from the perspective of fallen human beings or from the eyes of unfaith because from that point of view, death ends all.

But from the perspective of faith, death can be the end only of those who cannot bring themselves to faith in the holy, righteous, merciful, gracious, loving and living God. The life of Jesus from the very beginning to his death on the cross is the very definition of the divine in terms of the most authentic expression of the human reality.

This kind of thinking is also deeply rooted in the popular imagination, for death stands at the opposite pole of what people want most — to live in peace and security. For most people, the dead are dead. They may still continue to exercise some moral authority, but they have been relegated to nothingness. So the high and the mighty of the earth continue to dangle death threats before their enemies, and oftentimes carry them out, for they believe that nothing can silence their enemy more decisively and effectively than death. The Sanhedrin and the Temple priests had no effective counter-defense against the denunciations Jesus raised against them. Jesus had succeeded in exposing their moral bankruptcy and spiritual debauchery, so they conspired to kill Jesus and did so in a most heinous and brutal way.

Jesus suffered and died on the cross, and was buried. But he rose from the dead on the third day, and his resurrection snatched his disciples from deep despair, restored their faith, and gave them power to carry forward the work that Jesus had begun.

In fact, the power of the resurrection is very much with us, and it has been from the day Jesus rose from the dead. It was evident in the life of the apostles who rose from abject despair with the courage and hope when they learned that their Master rose from the grave. It has ever been with the faithful who radically believed in the power of the risen Lord as they turned situations of death into events of victory and hope as in the case of Christian martyrs who by their death gave life and power to the church. We find it each time the faithful would make a radical reversal of the world's way of death to make an affirmation of Christ's way to life.

## **Two Ways of Viewing the Resurrection**

### **God's Vindication of the Truth and Power of Jesus Christ**

The resurrection of Jesus could be seen as an act of divine vindication of the life, ministry and the totality of the work of Jesus. It is as if God was watching in God's heavenly abode when Jesus was engaged in a life and death battle against Satan and the evil hordes. And God saw Jesus carry out his struggle for truth, justice and love with perfect faithfulness and great courage and tenacity, but that his weapons as far as the ways of the world were concerned, were no match against the power and willingness to do evil of the Satanic forces. Jesus fought valiantly and faithfully till life ebbed out of his mortal frame. But God in heaven, intruded at the end, brought Jesus back to life, and declared Jesus the victor in the strife! This is too mythological in its form and the divine decision, while free and sovereign, is too arbitrary.

### **The power over sin, death and evil are enshrined in the ministry of Jesus**

How do we look at the resurrection of Jesus? Jesus spoke of himself as "the way, the truth and the life," and the way Jesus lived his life, carried out his ministry, and the way he died were all perfect exemplifications of who he really was. In other words, the entire life and being of Jesus stands as the authentic expression of human life that issues out of the will and the grace of God, and that is why Jesus is both truly God and truly human. It follows from this affirmation that Jesus the way, truth and the life, cannot be placed within God's scheme of things under the judgment of Satan or of death, and that therefore the power of the resurrection has always been with Jesus. What Jesus exemplified in his entire life, which includes his way of life, the way he related to God and to others, what he taught and the way he embodied his teachings with his life, his ministry and his death on the cross, a revelation of how the righteousness, the mercy, the love and grace of God was to be made incarnate in human life. In other words, what Jesus revealed to us is no less than divine righteousness and love as articulated in human life. It means that Jesus' life, finite as it was with all the limitations of human finitude, was nonetheless the bearer of God's justice, truth and love, which is beyond the power of death, or any other force to conquer and destroy. Even if Jesus did not physically rise from the dead, Christianity will still a resurrection faith! This not to say, however, that Jesus did not rise from the dead. We live in a scientific world, and our minds have been shaped by the rigorous logic of science. Science tells us that the dead do not come back to life. However, there are dimensions of reality that are beyond, and will forever be beyond the reach of scientific explanation. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being just as we all are human beings, and thus shared with us the state of being subject to death as it did happen to him in the crucifixion. Yet, Jesus had so thoroughly and radically articulated the justice and love of God in his entire ministry from the time he began it all the way to his death – and it is this thoroughness and radicality of his obedience to God's will that broke the power of death over him, and thus he conquered death and resurrected back to life! In Jesus' death, it was God in Christ reconciling himself to the world; the divine within the human came to perfect expression in Jesus when he submitted himself completely to the power of death and evil, for it was at that point that God's love was revealed as the power that conquers death. Jesus conquered death by dying to express God's love even for the enemy. Thus Jesus Christ rose from the dead!

### **What Kind of Body did Jesus Christ Resurrect with?**

This is an interesting question, but it has little to do with the resurrection faith. God will provide us with, as Paul says, “an incorruptible body,” but we have no way of determining what kind of body it is. If the body of the resurrected Lord is to provide us an answer it is clear that it is a body that transcends the barriers and limits of the bodies we now know. But it will be a body that would be a most appropriate bearer of a life that could enjoy the pleasures, joys, fulfillments and ecstasies of heavenly life. The faith of the Christian ought to be able to embrace that and not bother with questing for something our science or theology can give us.

### **The Meaning and Significance of the Resurrection Faith**

But, what for us, believers, is the supreme importance of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead?

First, the resurrection means the conquest of death — the ultimate enemy of life. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s assurance that death does not end all and is not the ultimate end of life. Therefore, the verities that come with the Gospel — truth, justice, love, peace will never be eradicated from the bosom of the human breast, but will ultimately prevail. It means that death no longer holds the terror that it does to ordinary mortals—because the resurrected Christ has ended its power to those who believe in Christ. So Paul exclaims, “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (I Cor. 15: 55).

Second, the resurrection of Jesus Christ grants the believer an extraordinary courage to stand for truth, love and justice inasmuch as one holds on to the knowledge of God’s abiding truth and power. This is true even for those who are faced with certain death for they do see behind death’s illusory claim to finality, and can welcome death to sweep over them. In the resurrection of Jesus, the power of death has been abolished and the appeal of its kingdom abrogated, and therefore they can face death with extraordinary courage and peace of mind.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus Christ creates a huge and powerful hope in the heart and mind of the believer because it pierces through the finality of the veil of death and makes a conquest of every obstacle that stands in the way of the believer as he/she carries on with the mission of the church. Because of the resurrection, Christian faith is perceived as hope through and through and sees every opposition — minor or major, as mere occasions for the exemplification of Christian courage and determination.

Fourth, in the resurrection of Jesus, the present world important as it is, is perceived in its transient character, for as the letter to the Hebrews says “for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” The perceived transience of the present world does not suggest to the believer that it is robbed of its importance and significance, for it is the terrain on which the battle for humanity and life is fought. It is where truth, justice, love and freedom should be struggled for, upheld as the real sovereign over all life and the whole of history. It is the place where the original covenant of God with all of humanity should be striven for. Nonetheless, it does not have finality for those who believe, for they still wait for the city that is yet to come.

Fifth, the resurrection of Jesus assures us that there is a process of liberation that is now going on in our lives and in our history which has been defined for us in an essential way in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus has laid out for us the way of the world as well as the way of Christ and the ongoing conflict that goes on between them, a conflict in which the followers of Christ are caught and seek to carry forth now and into the future. History is a terrain of struggle for truth, justice, freedom, love and peace. The believers in the crucified and resurrected Lord are necessarily involved and drawn into that struggle. As people who belong to the body of Christ, they too must wage that struggle in the same manner that Christ did.

Sixth, the resurrection of Jesus projects into the future “a new heaven and a new earth.” There, those who died in the faith will be garbed in the habiliments of “incorruptibility” in a human community that has been transformed by the power the resurrected Lord.

Yet, for all these, the resurrection faith does not proclaim a triumphalism that rides roughshod over all opposition because it draws its power from the crucified Lord who took the form of a suffering servant and waged his battle through suffering love that culminated with his death on the cross. Thus, what it proclaims is not a cheap and easy Christianity. It is one that makes a creative and significant rejoinder with its Lord who was resolute and faithful to the very end to God’s way of suffering love in passing judgment upon sin and evil and in luring authentic humanity to its highest possible expression. This is a very important dimension of the resurrection. Oftentimes, the followers of Jesus mistakenly take the era of the resurrection to signify the end of the cross and all that it is associated with. Thus, they behave like world conquerors.

# **The Second Coming of Jesus Christ**

**Levi V. Oracion**

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this,  
as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.  
For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

I Cor. 11: 25-26

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven  
with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call,  
and with the sound of the trumpet of God.  
And the dead in Christ will rise first;  
and then we who are alive, who are left,  
shall be caught up together with them in the clouds  
to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

1 Thess 4: 16-17

## **The Eschatological Hope of the Church**

Jesus promised his disciples and all those who believed in him that he would come again. In fact, the early Christians believed that Jesus’ second coming would happen soon and possibly in their lifetime. It was Albert Schweitzer, that famous philosopher-theologian as well as master interpreter of Bach on the organ, and a great New Testament scholar who discovered that the historical horizon in which the people of the New Testament lived, was thoroughly eschatological — that it was thoroughly dominated by the imminence of the Lord’s return. The Lord was about to come again, and the early Christians ordered their lives accordingly to prepare for this momentous event.

## **The Eschatological Hope: An Impetus for the Struggle for the Fullness of Life**

To believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior is to believe that he is coming again. The belief that Jesus is coming again does not simply hinged in what Jesus promised but also in the understanding that God is at work in history, wherein the first coming of Jesus constitutes both the essential divine act of liberation-redemption as well as the divine act of self-revelation. God’s salvific act was consummated in Jesus Christ in principle, and the gradual outworking of that liberative-redemptive work is an ongoing process, which will find its complete consummation with the second coming of Christ. God is with us, God is actively at work in our lives and in our history, and God draws us to participate in God’s work as God lures the whole of history and creation into their fullest consummation. Within this belief, a theology of struggle springs forth, for believers who plunge themselves in the struggle for truth, justice, love and peace necessarily becomes participants in God’s ongoing redemptive activity in the world. This belief has tremendous implications for the construction of a philosophy of history as well as a grand cosmology. But what does it hold for a Christian believer?

Jesus Christ is coming again! We do not know exactly when, or whether it is imminent or still a far off event. What matters is that the Lord is coming and that God in the fullness of God’s being is actively involved at the present moment to realize the perfect consummation of creation.

In other words, every moment has a critical importance because it is a time in which God acts, when God is present in our time and is face to face with us at every moment in time; it assumes supreme urgency for us. Thus, every moment in history becomes supremely important and demands a readiness as if one stands at the end time. Every moment presents its own demands, and the believer acts as if one stands at the brink of the end of time. This is in fact the kind of existence that the early Christians had — they sold everything they had because the normal expectations of those who lived in a temporal continuum was no longer true for them for the coming of Christ abrogates the ordinary future.

Because every point in time is temporal and cannot be invested with permanence, it should be regarded as transient, a stage towards the realization of another stage in the movement towards the coming Christ. It is pointless to establish a Christendom or permanent structures and arrangements on this terrestrial plane for they would be inevitably be superseded. However, every moment is a significant step, and interlocking block that integrates what

has been to what will be. This is forged in the present moment and therefore invests the Christian life with a power to “redeem the time” that could otherwise dissipate into nothingness.

Jesus is coming again, and all time for the believer is sucked in the direction of his coming. Therefore, Christian existence becomes existence in *via*. Life in Christ is a journey through time characterized by a single-mindedness to participate in God’s liberating, reconciling and transformative work in history. The One who is coming is the Christ, the be-all and end-all of all life, the reality event that invests all entities in reality with meaning, purpose, power and beauty. All of reality has a meaningfulness that is revealed in Christ and will find fulfillment in him. Thus, the Christian goes through every moment of his or her life, struggling against forces that work against the coming of the Christ and celebrating in joy and gratitude for being cradled in God’s mercy and grace as he or she moves through time with the Spirit of Christ.

Jesus is coming again. Therefore, the future is invested with power, meaning and beauty that surpasses both what is now and what has been. There is, therefore, a basic optimism in the Christian life but it is an optimism based not on what the terrestrial-historical plane holds. It is an optimism based on the God who brought all things into being and who works resolutely and faithfully to bring all of creation to their fullest and highest consummation.

Jesus is coming again. For that reason, it is to be expected that the principalities and powers will exert their utmost powers to thwart the arrival of the Christ. Historical reality is therefore a terrain of a long drawn out war between the forces of the sin, death and evil under the leadership of the Evil One, on the one hand, and that of Jesus Christ and those who believe and love him, on the other. To be a disciple of Christ is not to embrace the sweet, successful and easy life. “When Christ calls a man,” observes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “he bids him come and die.” There is the character of “being-unto-death” in the Christian life from the perspective of this world, because anyone who sincerely and passionately bears the Christian life becomes a target for harassment, persecution and elimination by the principalities and powers. The immense might of “the principalities and powers of this world” have impressed itself much too much upon the consciousness of Christians all through the years that the New Testament notion of rapture has captured the imagination of Christians particularly in difficult times. But Jesus’ coming again rides on a far greater power that seeks not merely to snatch a faithful few from evil’s reign of terror, but to make a total transformation of all reality. There will be seeming victories of the evil One, such as its seeming victory in the crucifixion, but the radical faith given to the believer will put him or her in a spiritual trance that would throw him or her into the courage and power of Christ in the face of terror and death.

Jesus is coming again. Then, we have the assurance that nothing rendered in obedience to him will ever pass into nothingness for each act of obedience, each life lived in faithfulness, each word spoken in truth and love will be woven by Christ into God’s coming kingdom. Thus, we dream of the life everlasting with Christ in the company of all the saints and the angels around the throne of God. Evil doers will get their just reward, and those who have suffered agony, pain, and death unjustly will be given a reward that would far exceed their expectations.

Jesus is coming again. Hence, what has been revealed before and what has been experienced as a joyous redemption will be brought to a far greater realization than we have ever dared imagine. Right now, we are making extrapolations on what we have seen and heard that the Christ brought about, but when Christ comes again, Christ’s work will find a consummation even our most creative minds cannot anticipate. Certainly, it cannot be a cancellation of what Christ has done, or even a revision of it to the point where it negates anything of what Christ has revealed and brought about. It is undoubtedly a glorious explosion of meaning and power that we have already seen in Christ.

## About the Writers

Hope S. Antone hails from Dumaguete City and currently serves as executive secretary for Faith, Mission and Unity of the Christian Conference of Asia, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She finished Bachelor of Mass Communication and Master of Divinity from Silliman University; Master of Theology major in New Testament studies from the Presbyterian Theological College and Seminary in Seoul, Korea; and Doctor of Education from Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, USA. She has taught communication courses at the Silliman University School of Communication; Christian Education courses at Silliman University Divinity School, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, and Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon, Myanmar; and Feminist Theology courses at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, Korea and Union Theological Seminary in Cavite, Philippines.

Noriel C. Capulong is an ordained minister of the Northeast Southern Tagalog conference of the UCCP. He received his degree of Doctor of Theology in Old Testament Studies from the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology. He is the former Dean of the Divinity School of Silliman University and presently helps in the formation of our future ministers as a full professor of Biblical Studies in the same school. He has been elected twice by the General Assembly of the UCCP to the Commission on Faith and Order. His book, "Reading and Hearing the Old Testament in Philippine Context", vol. 1 has already undergone second printing while the second volume of the same book is expected to be off the press within this year. Since undergoing a life changing kidney transplant more than a year ago, he has gradually returned to his normal teaching duties in the school and has also began receiving invitations anew to speak in various church gatherings and conferences.

Luna L. Dingayan is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) and the founding president of the Ecumenical Theological Seminary (ETS) in Baguio City. ETS is a ministerial formation center of the UCCP established in 1996. He used to chair the Faith and Order Commission of the UCCP General Assembly. He had been for many years with the Faith and Order Plenary Commission as well as the Ecumenical Theological Education Working Group of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He was one of the writers of the first commentary on the UCCP Statement of Faith, entitled: *"Like a Mustard Seed."*

Reuel Norman O. Marigza is the Field Education Director of the Silliman University Divinity School, where he teaches in the area of Practical and Applied Theology. He is a member of the Faith and Order Commission and Theological Education Board of the UCCP. He is a hymn translator and member of the UCCP Hymnal Committee. He was the first President of the National Christian Youth Fellowship and helped in the formation of the Christian Young Adults Fellowship and the United Church Workers Organization. He has served as Vice-Chair of the General Assembly and was Assistant Floor Leader in the '93 UCCP Constitutional Convention and was one of the drafters of the UCCP By-Laws. He has sat in several Boards of church-related institutions. He currently chairs the Board of Trustees of the Visayas Community Medical Center.

Considered one of the earlier advocates of theology or struggle, Everett L. Mendoza had been professor of Systematic Theology and Pastoral Care and Counselling at Silliman University Divinity School from 1976 up until his retirement in 2005. He has served UCCP as a pastor, vice-moderator, member of the National Judicial Commission and the Faith and Order Commission, chairman of the General Assembly and resident theologian.

Levi V. Oracion, an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, received his basic theological training at Union Theological Seminary, in Manila, and did his graduate theological studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. In the early 70's he was dean of the Divinity School of Silliman University, and later as president of his Alma Mater in Manila. His involvements in people's movements in the Philippines brought him to the World Council of Churches where he served as executive secretary for theological and ideological studies from 1985 through 1992. He is married to Amelia Naval de Leon, an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church; they have three children and four grandchildren. Currently, he is a mission volunteer at the Divinity School, Silliman University.

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro got her degrees in Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, Bachelor in Theological Education major in Christian Education, and Master of Divinity with focus in Biblical Studies from Silliman University. She helped established and served as project administrator of Kalauman Development Center, a church-related non-government organization that sought to address the situation of people in the depressed areas in Dumaguete City, taking children's issues as entry point. She earned her *Sacrae Theologiae Magister* (STM) in Ecumenics and Christian Ethics, Master of Philosophy, and Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from



Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She has published many articles and her book *The Jesus of Asian Women* published by Maryknoll's Orbis Books in New York enjoys an international circulation. She has taught Christian Education courses, Worship, Gender and Peace-building, Christian Ethics, foundational theology courses, Asian Religions, Asian Theologies, Contemporary Theologies, and Christologies - from the feminist perspective. She serves as the first woman dean of Silliman University Divinity School and oversees its Justice and Peace Center. In its general assembly in Malang, Indonesia, the Association of Theological Education of South East Asia (ATESEA), elected her Secretary, making her a member of its executive committee.

Lope Robin was the dean of the Divinity School when the Faith and Order Commission and the writers were working on these commentaries. A graduate of the Divinity School, he is presently a doctoral student (Th. D) at the Southeast Asia School of Theology (SEAGST) under the faculty development programme of Silliman University Divinity School. He is majoring in Eco-Feminist Theology, under the advisorship of Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro. He expects to finish his studies and return to teaching at the Divinity School next school year.

Essentially a pastor at heart and outlook, Mariano C. Apilado has served in the ministry of Jesus Christ through the UCCP in various capacities and levels. Ordained in 1961, he was Pastor of a number of local churches in North Luzon, Cosmopolitan Church in Metro Manila, and at Silliman University Church as Administrative Pastor and at the same time Chaplain of Silliman University. Since 2004, he has been with UCCP Davao City. He has also served as: Conference Secretary and Conference Youth Director of the North Central Luzon Conference; member of the Executive Committee as Vice-Chairman of the General Assembly and Acting Chairman; and as Chairman of the National Commission on Conflict Resolution. His institutional leadership includes serving as President of Union Christian College (UCC); President of the Union Theological Seminary (UTS) and concurrently Vice-President for Theological Education of the Philippine Christian University (PCU). At a critical time in the history of the UTS and PCU, he served as Acting President and Officer-in-Charge of PCU. Since 1965, Pastor Mar has been journeying through life with wife, the former Nellie R. Fonbuena, a consecrated deaconess with special competence in early childhood education. They had three daughters but lost one, Cherry Lynn, in a vehicular accident. They are blessed with seven grandchildren.

Ruth Panganiban-Billena is Deputy Conference Minister of the Lowland Cavite South Manila Conference. After her ordination in 1988, she spent her professional life in the parish ministry, the most recent of which is her nineteen years of service as associate pastor for seven years and senior pastor for twelve years of the UCCP-Ellinwood Malate Church. She earned her Doctor of Ministry Degree from the Union Theological Seminary, Philippines and Master Divinity Degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, California, U.S.A. She attended the graduate School in Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland in 1993-1994. A native of General Emilio Aguinaldo, Cavite Philippines, Pastor Ruth is married to Atty. Filimon Q. Billena with whom she has two daughters, Felize Ruth "FR" and Felize Joyce "FJ"