
MIDDLE CLASS REDEMPTION

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Introduction

I attend a middle-class church. I know it is middle-class because it was meant to be one. Our American Founding Pastor had a clear vision for the indigenous church he was instructed to build in the Philippines, and it was to be no shopfront affair. He rented space in a building in the Greenhills area alongside EDSA, from which the blaring sign “FAITH FELLOWSHIP” called to thousands of commuting office workers daily. His initial congregation, naturally, was made up of the working class.

Later, as our denomination grew and made the push northward to Central Luzon, the board decided to establish churches primarily in urban centers, and preferably in buildings close to the town plaza. There were times when circumstances forced the pastors to choose either to move to a smaller place (such as a house or a room over someone’s garage) or dissolve the church. Without exception, our Superintendent (the same Founding Pastor) counselled them to close shop rather than to downsize. It was obvious that his vision was for our denomination to be a ministry to middle class folk, and he was not prepared to compromise that plan. Now there are local denominations (like the Church of the Nazarene) that focus on the rural areas, and some (like the Greenhills Christian Fellowship) that cater to the rich. Ours, although we welcome everyone, is home mostly to blue- and white-collar workers, middle managers, and small entrepreneurs who are blessed to know what it is to earn their keep.

Why is this significant? Well, because this sector has been either maligned or overlooked by Filipino theologians for far too long. The fact is that the middle class was responsible for the people power “revolutions” in 1986 and 2001 that transformed this country and gave us a sense of national pride and identity. To disregard the middle class is to ignore a force potent enough to create social change and build a nation.

I. The Dilemma of the Middle Class

I belong to the middle class and I understand the relentlessness of the daily grind. We do not fall below the poverty line and therefore are not demographically “poor,” yet neither do we have enough to identify with the demographically “rich.” Those two sectors know who they are. They have either woes or wealth; we are somewhere in between. We minister to them and we work for them, but we are left to amuse ourselves. And as it goes, they receive the surplus of social attention. We are the doers; they are the objects of our doing.

We in the middle class—specially the lower middle class—have dreams. Wishes and plans and aspirations to improve our lot. However, we also have responsibilities. We are the ones who religiously pay bills we cannot weasel out of or evade. We are the ones who have had enough of an education to know what decency is and to have no excuse for wrongdoing. We are blamed by the poor for siding with the oppressive rich, and we are disdained by the rich for being “lower class.” Our question really is, who are we? And following that, where do we belong? What do we want out of life?

Many of us spend more than we can to live out middle class fantasies; we wallow in pretense and pretentiousness to escape dreary reality. And so we buy American pop music CDs and dress like J-Lo and dye our hair; but then we go home and cook anything but beef because it costs too much. We struggle to keep out of poverty and struggle to attain the comforts wealth brings. We want a better life than this, but do not know where to get it. We hope but sometimes find the effort too taxing to keep up.

Does religion help? That is hard to say. We fill the Catholic churches in superstitious compliance with the theology of retribution. Many of us have sought answers by going deeper. We have joined Couples for Christ and Singles for Christ and participated in the Parish Renewal Experience (PREX), and emerged as Bible-reading “renewed Catholics.” Others among us have become born again and found spiritual wealth and liberation. However, this faith dimension has marginalized us further from mainstream society, and we now have to deal with a “dual life”—one in the safe confines of our Christian community, and another in the rough-and-tumble world we are commissioned to evangelize. But how are we to reach them if we cannot identify with them? Who are we, and where do we belong? What do we want out of life?

We might find some answers in history.

II. A Brief Look at History

The late '70s and early '80s was a period of political and theological foment in the Philippines. The country was held in a stranglehold by Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, who exhausted all means to remain in power. They not only gagged the opposition, they also milked dry every economic resource available to them for personal gain. Much of their activity was common knowledge yet only a handful had the courage and the means to challenge them. Filipinos were immersed in *ban*,¹ and the ghosts of assassinated political opponents and their families wailed for vindication.

Already regionally fragmented, the Philippines crumbled further as ideology and the pursuit of mammon rent the established political parties asunder. Social commitments were ignored and promises left unfulfilled; people lived practically at the pleasure of the regime. In the face of this disintegration, people found balance, as usual, in their “in-groups”—family and friends with whom they primarily identified.²

Anthropologist F. Landa Jocano has described the in-group as the traditional normative source of values in Philippine society.³ Locano claims

¹According to Korean *minjung* theologian Suh Nam-Dong, *ban* is “the suppressed, amassed and condensed experience of oppression caused by mischief or misfortune so that it forms a kind of ‘lump’ in one’s spirit.” Another *minjung* theologian, Hyun Young-Hak, describes *ban* as “the sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of total abandonment (‘Why hast thou forsaken me?’), a feeling of acute pain of sorrow in one’s guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wiggle, and an obstinate urge to take ‘revenge’ and to right the wrong all these constitute.” Feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung says it is the “typical, prevailing feeling of the Korean people.” (Cf. Chung Hyun Kyung, “‘Han-pu-ni’: Doing Theology from Korean Women’s Perspective,” *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, R.S.Sugirtharajah, ed. [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994], 55.)

²Rodrigo D. Tano, *Theology in the Philippine Setting: A Case Study in the Contextualization of Theology* (Quezon City: New Day, 1981), 39.

³F. Landa Jocano, *Filipino Value System: A Cultural Definition* (Manila: Punlad, 2000), 53-57. Jocano identifies this groupthink element as *asal*, which, “as a standard, refers to sets of dominant and commonly shared values and norms which Filipinos use as points of reference in expressing themselves, interpreting the actions of others, and in regulating interpersonal and intergroup relations... Good character is known as *mabuting asal* and right conduct is *magandang asal*... Both aspects of the concept reinforce each other in defining the parameters of what is

that whereas Filipinos have a general idea of the true, the good and the beautiful, we determine specific values relativistically; thus, the idea that “what is right for one group may not be right for another” is, for us, a perfectly normal principle.

Locano asserts that in the Philippine setting, there is hardly any idea formed in individual minds that was not originally fostered by a group mentality. For good or ill, one’s personality, pattern of behavior, values, and modes of thinking are determined by what the group thinks and does and cherishes.⁴ This group-centeredness worked both for and against the Filipinos under martial law. It was behind the evil impulse that kept us subjugated, yet it was also the very reason why many of us survived.

The Church attempted to address this socio-political travesty theologically. It happened that elsewhere in Asia, voices were also being raised against oppressive social structures with colonial roots; the Philippine situation was a remarkable but not extraordinary experience. Theologians such as Aloysius Pieris (*An Asian Theology of Liberation*), Tissa Balasuriya (*Towards the Liberation of Theology in Asia*), and Henriette Marianne Katoppo (*Asian Theology: An Asian Woman’s Perspective*), among others, were exploring the path trailblazed by Latin American liberation theologians, and the Philippine Church was listening.

Spearheaded by Jesuit scholars, theological reflection in the Philippines began in earnest. In 1979, a group participated in the Asian Theological Conference in Wennapuiwa, Sri Lanka and contributed treatises that influenced the crafting of the conference’s Final Statment.⁵ In a later study on Philippine Theology, Dr. Rodrigo D. Tano profiled the five leading Filipino theologians of his day (1981) and concluded that Catholics Carlos Abesamis, Catalino Arevalo, Edicio de la Torre and Protestant Emerito Nacpil (with the exception of Fr. Vitaliano Gorospe, who focused

good, true, and beautiful. In this way, we are able to distinguish the different levels of importance (sic) of things, events, feelings and actions. This distinction, in turn, allows us to eliminate those negative impulses from our choices and *to reject behavior which tend to work against our ideas (or those of the group) of the desirable. ...Without asal-based points of view, it would be difficult to express ourselves in concrete behavior because there are no standards of “rightness” to observe and no ethical or moral norms to follow*” (italics supplied).

⁴Locano, *Filipino Value System*, 53-57.

⁵Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1980), 8-10.

on moral rehabilitation), identified the liberation of the poor from oppression as the principal theological task of the moment.⁶

With slight differences of approach and perspective (some veering toward Marxist dialectic), the Filipino theologians in resonant self-recrimination and abasement decried society's indifference to the plight of the poor, calling such apathy sin and moral depravity. They railed against their middle-class theology, born of middle-class privileges and middle-class longings,⁷ and vowed to divest themselves of this shameful mindset. The demand was for praxis; the call, for commitment.⁸

In an era where the line between oppressor and oppressed was so clearly drawn, identifying the victim was not so hard. Everyone felt victimized (except, of course, the victimizers), and the demarcation between social classes was no longer as clear.

On one side were the regime and the rich associated with the regime; on the other side was every one else—rich, middle class, and poor. The political situation was such a cathartic experience that it brought our common denominator as Filipinos and human beings to the fore and, significantly, forced the “apparatus” of our social existence (factors which we now considered inessential or secondary such as class and status) to the periphery.

Oppositionist Benigno Aquino's assassination on August 21, 1983 gave voice to the middle class. He was one of us, and we unitedly decried the violation of our in-group. Individuals from the middle class—unheard of and unthinkable as political leaders—took to the streets and mobilized both rich and poor in their communities. Soon, the protest movement was beyond quelling.

On February 23, 1986, after the mock elections that spuriously validated Marcos, a midnight call over Radio Veritas (a Catholic radio news station) sent hundreds of thousands of the middle-class to stand vigil at EDSA with the poor and the rich for the protection of liberty. In spite of the fragmentation of Philippine society, a bond was formed under the leadership of the middle class, which had found its identity in the

⁶Tano, *Theology in the Philippine Setting*, 87-142.

⁷Carlos H. Abesamis, “Reflections from the Philippines” in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*, Virginia Fabella, ed. (New York: Orbis, 1980), 136.

⁸Abesamis, “Reflections from the Philippines,” 136.

quintessentially Filipino concept of *bayanihan* (community). We were suddenly one large in-group at EDSA, individuals with a common enemy, with a common aspiration for freedom, with a common sense of goodwill toward each other. This was the vaunted “Spirit of EDSA” that was first felt among the risk-taking middle-class as they rallied in the streets in the early days of the movement.

Theologian Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano describes this phenomenon from a Christian perspective:

My question on where to situate myself as a Filipino Christian in the context of what was happening in my country was answered dramatically. It was at Gate 2 of Camp Aguinaldo, fronting Camp Crame, the two camps which became the center of the four-day revolution against the dictatorial regime of Marcos. ...

It was awesome. ...

The awesomeness lay not only in the numbers—estimated to be 2.5 million by noontime that day (Feb. 24)—but in the unity of spirit and the concern for one another. It seemed that in fighting for a just cause, people turned to one another in common humanity. The sophisticated rich gladly held the shoulder of the grimy, rubber-sandaled poor to form one endless line to make human traffic possible.

It was as if, to a man, the entire Filipino nation had stood up to say decisively: “We can do it together—through prayer, by our collective presence and our willingness to die. We will bring this dictatorship to its knees—not by arms, but by reconciliation; not by violence, but in peace.

In those fearsome but glorious days, people of all religions, classes and kinds drank from the same plastic cups, slept on the same cold streets, hushed each other’s fears and apprehensions and inspired each other to heroism. Never the like has been seen before.⁹

Indeed. However, even in the recollection of such a glorious moment, the deferential attitude of the middle class becomes evident. It will be noticed that Miranda, though she spoke of rich and poor, omitted mention-

⁹Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano, “Dictatorship and Revolution: Our Philippine Experience” in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, William Dyrness, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 159-160.

ing the middle class in her comments, as if we do not exist. She did this most probably because she belongs to it. She did this because—like servants at a ball—we in the middle class do not often call attention to ourselves.

In January 2001, a second call to EDSA was sounded, this time through cellphones, the newest middle-class gadget, and against President Joseph E. Estrada. The enemy was not a dictatorship as before but, as the middle class had it, immorality personified. This uprising was called a moral revolution, again led and manned by the ubiquitous middle class (no longer to be confused with the poor masses, who were ostensibly absent and held their own version of People Power some weeks later). While this did not equal EDSA 1 in magnitude and nobility, it still marked the moral leadership of the middle class and their ability to foment social action when and where required.

Towards a Middle-Class Theology

Why has the middle class been ignored, theologically? It was originally due to the call for commitment to the poor and the challenge to *immerse* oneself in their milieu that the middle class identity was surrendered and ultimately forsaken. There was a conscious effort among theologians *not to be* middle class, *not to think* middle class, and *not to act* middle class because it was viewed as insensitive to suffering sensibilities.¹⁰ In theological circles at the time, the middle class identity was taboo.

The theology was based on the concepts of *kenosis* and service, so that Abesamis could speak of the need to be “remodeled or converted from the petty-bourgeois to a truly liberated grassroots consciousness and lifestyle.”¹¹ Yet even as the ATC Final Statement looked forward to the formation of a theology “liberated from its present race, class, and sex prejudices,” it declared that “to be truly liberating, this theology must arise from the Asian poor with a liberated consciousness.”¹² If this is not a class bias, then nothing is. A good theology addresses needs where they are found. Spiritual needs are not the monopoly of a particular class but are discovered in any class, any sex, and any nation. Part of the task of the Church is to

¹⁰“The Final Statement,” in *Asia’s Struggle*, 157.

¹¹Abesamis, “Reflections from the Philippines,” 138.

¹²“The Final Statement,” 158, 156.

recognize these various needs and endeavor to succor the needy as best it can.

Times have changed. The monsters in Philippine society are no longer hideous and are harder to recognize. The present struggle is for economic survival, and in the existential strain, values are lost.

The rich have options. They go abroad to escape the heat; and when that is not auspicious, they build expensive, centrally air-conditioned, Western-style malls to remind them of other places and climates. The poor are subtly intimidated into staying away from these centers, and so they do. They cluster instead in enclaves of poverty where the Church has massed with them in empathy and charity. The middle class, however, is drawn into the lairs of the rich and given more fodder for fantasy. We are left alone to find our way through the maze of false solutions in our search for meaning and peace.

And yes, we seek our identity. We know we do not belong in such places, that though we are free to enter and shop and gaze and enjoy, it is not home to us. The environment is wonderful but the people, though nice, are artificial; no real connection is made. Home is somewhere else, more native, more Filipino.

Once in 1986, and again in 2001, the middle class found its identity in crisis—as it rose to the challenge of community over individuality—and triumphed. In the in-group feeling, the middle class is at home, wherever it may find itself. We bond with others like ourselves and drop all pretenses to be thoroughly honest and open. A theology of the middle class must help it to connect with that identity. A theology of the middle class must help it use that identity to be a force for social transformation.

A striking characteristic of today's middle class mentality is loneliness and a search for purpose. We are seeking friends, people who will understand our struggle to make ends meet, who will recognize the victory we experience daily just by coming home with spirit and body intact. We seek a transcendent reality which tells us that all this hardship will make sense someday, perhaps in the afterlife; and if we endure, we will overcome. The Church tells us to pray and persevere, that Jesus is Lord and that He died to save us. But, as Fr. Pieris says, we need more than a doctrine, we need a message.¹³

¹³Aloysius Pieris, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey" in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, R. Sugirtharajah, ed. (New York: Orbis, 1994), 145.

Christians have a message to deliver. The Bible tells us that Jesus is that friend, the One who sticks closer than a brother. He understands and rejoices that we have made it this far. He assures us of the happy afterlife if we trust in Him; and if we give Him our friendship, He will make sense of our here and now.

But who will tell the middle class this message? Do we pronounce it from the pulpit and then no more? The Church itself must reach out in friendship to the lost and lonely middle class—through small groups and informal Bible studies, through casual fellowships and fun encounters—in order to embody the kind of love Jesus the Best Friend offers.

Quite often we Christians approach people mainly with “an eye for the kill.” We are so bent on racking up numbers that we formulaically mouth the Gospel and expect immediate converts. Can we wait for the love of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to work in our “prospects”? Do we have that kind of patience? The poor are ministered to in their own way—their existential needs give us an easy entry into their world. The rich too, have their own special handle. However, with the middle class, it is friendship and honest love; and sometimes it takes time. Do we have the tenacity to wait? This ministry is sacrificial and forbearing. And yet John tells us that there is no greater love than the kind which lays its life down for a friend.

However, we bear a deeper message for middle class people who welcome Jesus as a friend. We must remind them of their potential, of their own ability to transform society, of their power to create order out of chaos. We must give them that identity by telling them of Jesus’ love for them and how it must be translated into love for others (Matt. 22:37-39, 1 John 4:7-21). In this—Jesus’ love, and their own altruistic love for others—they may find true meaning and purpose in life. The growth of fraternal love as a result of promoting a common cause is so naturally Filipino that it is quite easily communicated. The common cause this time, would be the Gospel and its revolutionary effect on society. If the born again middle class truly wants a better life, it must reach out in friendship with the Gospel to those who, like it did, are still floundering in loneliness and lostness.

Conclusion

If another political crisis hits the Philippines, it is quite likely that the frontrunners in the popular response would be the members of the middle class. We must prepare them even now for that moment. In a day when values are eroding and people are preoccupied with individual concerns, what a formidable force the ennobled, Jesus-bolstered middle class would

be. As leaders of a gigantic in-group, the sanctified middle class would effortlessly establish the norm for morality and ethics in society and emerge as small group facilitators all over the metropolis. What potential for a harvest!

Without negating the need for dedicated ministry to the poor and the upper classes, it must be stressed that the middle class must receive attention it has not previously enjoyed from the Church. It has been seen as individuals—as errand boys and girls, as congregation, as evangelistic targets—but not as a class with special needs, and not as partners in ministry. The times have changed, and the Church needs to hear the silent longing of the middle classes without delay. To understand the middle class and reach out to its members with the love of Jesus in order to save it from lostness and loneliness would be to develop a truly relevant theology for this important yet neglected sector of Philippine society. It would be extending a hand to a friend.

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