

Opinion Article / Notes

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa: 500 Years since Christianity Arrived in our Islands

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On September 26, 2021 Pope Francis once again made a statement that further cements his reputation as a Pope unafraid to speak up to challenge his flock to embrace a Christianity so badly needed in a fractured world today. For, indeed, ours is a world divided according to our specific loyalties determined by our classes, races, genders, ethnicities, cultural and religious traditions. He was quoted as saying: “It is a sin to use Christianity to judge and exclude.”¹

In his statement which he addressed to the pilgrims gathered in St. Peter’s Square on that day, the Pope said: “Christians must be vigilant and avoid the temptation to

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¹ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/09/27/pope-francis-judge-exclude-241499>

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think better of others, an attitude that risks making the church a place of “separation and not community... Let us ask for mercy to overcome the temptation to judge and categorize”... and that Christians must be vigilant and avoid the temptation to think for themselves better than others.”

In our country that is now in the thick of celebrating the 500th year of the arrival of Christianity, this statement has a greater resonance. And the timing is perfect since it is coming out just before the month of October which—for a number of years now—has been widely celebrated by practically all institutions as IP month.

A number of events taking place in other countries have also highlighted the issues that continue to be concerns for indigenous communities. In a landmark decision made by the Australian Federal Court last September 27, the State returned 53,000 square miles of land to the Martu people, one of the aborigines of Australia.² This is the largest land concession to Australian Aborigines since the government began settling indigenous land claims 10 years ago, following a court ruling that rejected the notion that Australia was uninhabited before the arrival of European colonizers in 1788. With this decision, the State formally recognized the Martu as the traditional owners/inhabitants of the land. It was in the 1950s when the remaining Martu were removed from this region by the British government to clear the way for testing of international ballistic missiles.

On the other side of the globe, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops last September 24 – for the first time after public pressure built up on this issue

² “In Landmark Ruling, Australia Returns Land to Martu,” <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/landmark-ruling-australia-returns-land-martu> (accessed 03 Dec 2021).

– officially apologized for their role in helping to promote the residential school system.³ This system – which forcibly separated indigenous children from their families and subjected them to malnourishment as well as physical and sexual abuse – started in 1831 and which persisted up to 1996. It was the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission which brought this issue to the public attention in 2015, referring to this as “cultural genocide.” In their statement, the organization expressed “profound remorse” and apologized unequivocally along with all Catholic entities that were directly involved in the operation of the schools.

This kind of apology echoes what Pope St. John Paul II did as we began to welcome the new millennium in early 2000, when he was quoted as saying sorry for the sins of the Church.⁴ His sweeping apology for attacks on Jews, women, and minorities was his most audacious initiatives for the twilight of his papacy. Inside the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he led Catholicism into the “unchartered territory by seeking forgiveness for sins committed against Jews, heretics, women, Gypsies and native peoples.”⁵ He further said: “We forgive and we ask forgiveness. We are asking pardon for the divisions

³ “Canadian Catholic bishops apologize for role in indigenous residential schools,” [https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canadian-catholic-bishops-apologize-role-indigenous-residential-schools-2021-09-25/#:~:text=VANCOUVER%2C%20Sept%2024%20\(Reuters\),for%20years%20despite%20public%20pressure](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canadian-catholic-bishops-apologize-role-indigenous-residential-schools-2021-09-25/#:~:text=VANCOUVER%2C%20Sept%2024%20(Reuters),for%20years%20despite%20public%20pressure) (accessed 03 Dec 2021).

⁴ <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/pope-apologizes-for-serious-sins-during-colonization-of-americas#:~:text=notorious%20Palmasola%20prison.-,Pope%20apologizes%20for%20'serious%20sins'%20during%20colonization,of%20Americas%20Back%20to%20video&text=John%20Paul%20II%2C%20for%20his,visit%20to%20the%20Dominican%20Republic> (accessed 03 Dec 2021).

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/13/catholicism.religion> (accessed 03 Dec 2021).

among Christians, for the use of violence that some have committed in the service of truth, and for attitudes of mistrust and hostility.”

In the decade approaching 2022, the CBCP began preparing for the 500th year celebration. As early as 2012, there were stirrings to make sure that the preparations would be in place. Thus for the next nine years, a theme was proposed for every year including: Integral Faith Formation (2013), The Laity (2014), The Poor (2015), The Eucharist and the Family (2016), The Parish as a Communion of Communities (2017), The Clergy and Religious (2018), The Youth (2019), Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue (2020), *Missio ad gentes* [mission to the nations] (2021). Unfortunately because of the pandemic, the 2020/2021 themes were not so well fleshed out in terms of concrete programs.

In 2017, I personally began to raise some suggestions regarding the possibilities for 2022 commemoration. I suggested to the DAKATEO (Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines; <https://www.dakateo.com/>) that, as committed theologians, we should provide an alternative voice to what I already expected would be the dominant theme to be pursued by the official Church. I was already afraid that the dominant theme would sound triumphalistic and there could be a romanticization of this so-called precious gift of the Christian faith introduced to our ancestors. I would have no objection to highlighting the positive contribution of the Spanish friars, but I thought it should not be at the expense of a non-recognition of the transgressions committed in the course of the colonial regime where evangelization, in the words of the historian Vicente L. Rafael, was clothed in a colonization garb.⁶

⁶ As detailed in his book, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Then I thought I could push this through the CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (ECIP) whose members I thought might want to raise this suggestion at the CBCP assembly. They had invited me to be a consultant at their Commission meetings to prepare activities for the years 2020 to 2022. I suggested coming up with the alternative voice as well as exploring what had previously been done by Pope St. John Paul II and a group of bishops in the Philippines who did echo their apology to the indigenous peoples. One possibility was to hold a public ritual to acknowledge that the first converts to Christianity were indigenous.

This would popularize the notion that we – who today are lowlanders and are not classified by the NCIP as IPs – are a people with indigenous roots. And we do hold a big responsibility to care for the descendants of our indigenous ancestors who are holding on to their indigenous way of life. As the imminent Jesuit historian, John W. O'Malley SJ posited in terms of his approach to writing history – “The continuities are stronger and deeper than the discontinuities...”⁷ Quoting the novelist, William Faulkner: “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” Today many of us Filipinos living in lowland rural and urbanized communities have the equivalent of racist attitudes in dealing with the IPs, forgetting that deep inside ourselves lurk our indigenous roots.

Somehow this suggestion of a public ritual never took off, but the ECIP decided that it would pursue its own process through dialogue with local shamans (*baylan*, *beliyans*, *babaylans*, *catalonan*, *mumbaki*, *dorarakit* and other local equivalent) and make this an occasion for a reconciliation ritual. Just when the pandemic began to

⁷ Emanuele Colombo, “‘So What?’: A Conversation with John W. O'Malley,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7 (2020): 117-133; doi:10.1163/22141332-00701008

take place in Wuhan, a model of such a dialogue took place in Butuan where more than 30 Higaonon *baylans* met with 8 bishops and a hundred priests, religious and lay people for a 3-day dialogue that would culminate in a ritual of reconciliation.⁸ This was to be a model to be duplicated in other parts of the country, but then the pandemic took place.

Then 2022 unfolded but given the pandemic, the CBCP could not pursue their original plans for the 500th year. But they did manage to come up with a logo and a theme song. It was left to the different commissions, congregations, Catholic universities, and seminaries to find ways to implement whatever could be organized, primarily taking place online. As these were mainly taking place in the internet, it catered primarily to the middle-class and given the fact that most were organized within an academic setting, there was a lot more talk than walk. Somehow between the intellectual discourses and philosophical treatises, the question of how we can make amends with our indigenous ancestors – through their present-day descendants – got lost.

Meanwhile at the ground level, the situation of our indigenous peoples continues to worsen especially in those contested territories where corporate interests – protected by the State apparatus including its main agency, namely the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the military – continue to push their agenda at the expense of both the lives of our IPs but also the integrity of creation. Mining, logging (of whatever forests are still remaining), the expansion of agribusiness plantations and infrastructure development mainly for energy generation (dams and coal power

⁸ See, Karl M. Gaspar, “A Sojourner’s View: A Time to Speak and a Time to Listen,” *MindaNews* (March 7, 2020), <https://www.mindanews.com/mindaviews/2020/03/a-sojourners-view-a-time-to-speak-and-a-time-to-listen/>

plants) have further dislocated IP communities from their ancestral territories. Mining in particular is being aggressively pushed, as the Duterte administration sees it as a primary source to boost our GNP.

Framed within the backdrop of the longest-running communist insurgency in this part of the world and the passage of the anti-terror law, the State is on a rampage in these contested territories from parts of the Cordillera and Central Luzon to Panay and the four corners of Mindanao. For a number of years already even before the passage of the anti-terror law, State terrorism has led to bombings of *Lumad* communities, the closure of schools (tagged as centers of recruitment for NPAs and indoctrination) and the arrest, imprisonment and killings of IP leaders. The red-tagging has even reached the lexicon of IP vocabulary.

In Mindanao, when the Local Church since the 1970s – through the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) and their local counterparts and ministries – became active in setting up its IP ministry, the word *Lumad* had arisen as the collective term to refer to the IPs across the Island (in a way that *katutubo* is used in the North). Eventually, NGOs, CSOs, academics, media and even LGUs began to use this word even if the articles were in English.

In March of this year, those of us in the IP ministry for decades – who experienced the rise and popularization of the use of the word – *LUMAD* – to refer to the IPs across Mindanao – were stunned when we heard that the NCIP in an *en banc* meeting approved a resolution banning the use of this word as this is how the CPP-NPAs refer to the IPs.⁹ Ergo, *Lumads* are

⁹ Carolyn O. Arguillas, “The IP struggle continues as NCIP red-tags and bans use of “Lumad,” the collective word for Mindanao IPs since the late 1970s,” *MindaNews* (March 20, 2021), <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2021/03/the-ip-struggle->

synonymous with IPs who have been recruited by the NPAs. So, the NCIP proposed that henceforth everyone should refrain from using the term *Lumad*. With the anti-terror law as backdrop, it is easy to understand why a word – apart from persons and institutions – can also be red-tagged! Such a preposterous idea manifesting a stupidity, grounded in a total ignorance of historical narratives!

So unlike countries like Australia, where the State has manifested some sense of goodwill to respond to the demands of IPs, in this country the State moves in the opposite direction! What a letdown considering that when Mrs. Aquino took over as President and convened a Constitutional Assembly, the Constitution that got approved in 1987 radically changed the discourse of land ownership by adding ancestral land/domain as the third category (adding it to public and privately-owned land).

Although it took a long while, the Congress – with many members who were landlords – still approved the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act or IPRA in 1997, which was a landmark law finally recognizing the IP peoples' right to their remaining ancestral territories. However, in a period of almost thirty years (1997-2021), NCIP the lead agency in implementing has very little to show in terms of the actual benefits enjoyed by the IPs. By and large, based on actual research studies on the ground, IPs have to move mountains before their application for Certificate of Ancestral Land Titles (CADT) are processed. And even as some have been approved, there is only a handful that can claim to be success stories as

continues-as-ncip-red-tags-and-bans-use-of-lumad-the-collective-word-for-mindanao-ips-since-the-late-1970s/; see, Jezreel Ines, "Cagayan de Oro archbishop slams move to ban use of the term 'lumad'," <https://www.rappler.com/nation/cagayan-de-oro-archbishop-slams-move-ban-use-term-lumad/>

support for the land development hardly got facilitated by the NCIP.

But it is not just the State that we need to critique in their failure to dramatically respond to the just demands of our IPs. We who are part of the Church in this country, must we willing to also knell down and recite the words – *Mea Culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* – as we do every time a Eucharistic celebration takes place in our chapels, churches and cathedrals. This is not to discount what have been accomplished by those among the bishops, priests, and religious and lay organizations and institutions who have done their best to respond to the needs of IPs including risking their lives to be in solidarity with those persecuted by the State. However, if we are to be humble enough to admit our limitations, there's been a lot more talk than walk in reference to the IP ministry. For example, in the field of inculturation, there is very little that has unfolded at the grassroots level among the IPs who have embraced Catholicism.

Comes now our 500th year celebration. I cannot claim to have a comprehensive knowledge of what has and will continue to happen (as the quincentennial celebration extends until April 2022) but given the pandemic, it is mainly through online that I have some knowledge of what is taking place out there. Of the few announcements, statements, fora/conferences, and videos that I have read, attended or watched, the quality of these are quite uneven. Some are excellent although they may only reach a limited audience.

And then there is the video produced by the Commission on the Clergy which detailed the presence of the clergy in our islands within the first fifty years of Spanish conquest. I had seen an earlier video of a general church history produced by the Archdiocese of Cebu where Fr. Ramon Echica gave a theological reflection. And I was quite pleased with it. Then Archbishop Jose

Cabantan informed me of a video posted on social media as he wanted to know what I thought of it. So I watched it. While watching this, I cringed at the manner that the narrative unfolded. I then resolved to write my comments to the Executive Director of the Commission on the Clergy. I did (see letter, below).

And then came Pope Francis and his September 26 statement. “It is a sin to use Christianity to judge and exclude... we should not be a place of separation but community... avoid the temptation to think we are better than others.” Imagine if there was a Pope Francis already when Magellan left Spain on his way to the Moluccas but along the way reached our islands? If what Pope Francis said was a guide for all the friars that came to the islands across Spain’s colonial regime? And pray tell, how would those in the Commission of the Clergy today interpret the words of Pope Francis?

I wish Pope Francis could watch this video.

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Dear Fr. Vergara,

First, let me introduce myself. I am Bro. Karl Gaspar CSsR. At present I am teaching at the St. Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute (SATMI) based here in Davao City and on leave as a faculty member of the Ateneo de Davao University Anthropology Department. I am also a member of the Philippine Catholic Theological Association (DAKATEO) and the Philippine Anthropological Association.

I first hesitated to write you this letter but upon the advice of friends, I thought it might not be a bad idea to share my

thoughts on the video that your Commission just produced - The First Fifty Years (in reference to the first 50 years of the 500 years since the arrival of Christianity to our islands). I had not seen it earlier and I managed to view it only because Archbishop Jose Cabantan of Cagayan de Oro forwarded to me a copy of your video production. I immediately watched it, because the good Archbishop asked me for my reaction to this production. After carefully viewing the video, I did give my reaction to Arch. Cabantan.

I also immediately thought of writing you to this letter to give you feedback on your production. I wish in the credits at the end of the production, it stated who wrote the text which was read as the commentary to accompany the visuals. Thus, the viewer is left to guess who this person could be. However, I assume that since you are the Executive Secretary of this Commission you would have been on top of the entire production and would know who was the writer of the text.

There is no question that all those involved in coming up with this video production must have worked very hard so this can be finished. I certainly acknowledge their efforts. For it can be said that in matters related to answering the questions of WHO, WHEN AND WHERE – related to the historical narratives of the first fifty years of the evangelization campaign in our islands - the researchers and the one who wrote the text did their best to answer the questions in such a way as to be faithful to how the historical narratives unfolded.

What I was not pleased was how the questions WHY and HOW were answered in the course of narrating the historical overview of the first fifty years. The researchers and writer did answer the questions, but I am afraid their "interpretation" of the data or the manner that they viewed the events that unfolded were from the "lens of the colonizers, namely the Spanish conquistadores and the friars." The view was very clear in terms of the following aspects of the narrative:

1. How our indigenous ancestors were viewed in terms of their way of life, culture and belief system. The "colonial mindset" naturally would refer to their indigenous belief system as PAGANISM and if this term is to be understood the way the colonizers did, it would be synonymous with animists, superstitious, primitive and even wild (as this term was used

by the American colonizers including anthropologists). Everything about their culture and belief system was lumped together as those of pagans and the sub-text was that we owe the Spanish colonizers/friars a debt of gratitude that our ancestors abandoned this superstitious belief system in favor of Christianity that made them "civilized". I thought this was an insult to our indigenous ancestors. And since I firmly believe that - even if I am no longer an IP person myself today - the roots of my identity is that of the indigenous, I, too, would have felt insulted. That section of this video - which was rather lengthy - looked down on our baylans/beliyans/babaylans as if these were just wild persons whose faith practices misled the people into practices that didn't benefit them in any way - physically, mentally, spiritually. Many anthropologists who have done studies on our *babaylans* would have disapproved of this video and its commentary on the *babaylans*. And there is even a section in the video that indicated that the indigenous practices have been obliterated from our communities today. The author of this text clearly has no exposure at all to the hundreds of indigenous communities that still exist throughout the country, where their indigenous belief system is still intact and they have their *babaylans* who continue to conduct rituals. And there is no reason to believe that they will disappear soon. Today, across the world, there is a lot of interest on the part of anthropologists and theologians who are seriously dialoguing with the shamans as to their spiritualities as it has been proven that these indigenous wellsprings have been a source of their well-being for thousands of years. And those of us interested in inter-faith dialogue have asserted that in dealing with IPs today, our goal is not to convert them to Christianity but to dialogue with their indigenous faith. Certainly a far cry from what the video asserts that we owe the Spanish friars a debt-of-gratitude that we abandoned this belief system.

2. The manner that you dealt with how the colonizers dealt with the Moros also has to be critiqued. In an effort to be "triumphalistic" in showing how the Spaniards were "graced by the heavens" because their battle against the Moros were successful, the video condescended on the Moro people. I can imagine what would be the reaction of our partners in

Mindanao's Inter-faith Dialogue movement if they watched your video production, because the sub-text is that the Moro were the enemy of the people. When in fact - if history is to be interpreted from the perspective of the colonized - what they did was self-defense. For after all, who forcibly occupied the islands and wanted to control its inhabitants? Who tried to penetrate Muslim Mindanao so they could be subjugated and then become subservient to the King of Spain? Again if one were to interpret correctly the reasons why the Moro people fought the colonizers from their perspective, our assertion of the triumph of Catholicism over Islam would be put in the right perspective.

3. There is an inaccuracy in the way the video interpreted how we were able to keep our languages intact, and unlike most countries in Latin America where today the Spanish language has become dominant. The author even mentioned the word INCULTURATION. Inculturation as a discourse only appeared in the Church lexicon in the contemporary period, and as a discourse around the time of Vatican II. So I do not know why the writer thought that by learning our languages, the friars did so because of inculturation, meaning they consciously were interested in dialoguing with our ancestors' culture. The fact is that they did so for practical resources, not in matters that are discursive, let alone with a theological intent. The fact is that because we were already at the tail-end of Spain's colonial regime and we were the farthest from Spain, only a few colonizers and friars reached our land. So there was no way they could set up a whole system of instruction where the Spanish language could be taught to the natives. It was far more practical for the missionaries to learn the local languages than find a way to have the entire population learn how to speak Spanish. Besides, one cannot discount a "racist" pejorative mindset among the colonizers who may have thought it was beneath them for us to be speaking their mother tongue. But in the end the fact is that our ancestors kept their indigenous languages and we are a people still speaking our mother tongues until today.

4. Two years before 2021 - the year we are to celebrate the 500th year - I already alerted DAKATEO and the ECIP members and staff that when the celebration will be done in

2021, there will be the danger that the CBCP and other church institutions would rather have a "triumphalistic" manner of celebrating this event. Which is to mean that there will be a highlighting of the POSITIVE outcome of the colonization-evangelization campaign of the Spanish colonizers. I tried my best to suggest ways that could both highlight the POSITIVE but not sacrifice HIGHLIGHTING ALSO THE NEGATIVE, that is, the negative impact especially of the colonization process, but also how the evangelization process would be conducted. This video is exactly what I feared would happen. Unfortunately with the pandemic, nothing really came out of my suggestion, so I was forced to do it myself. In the process, I wrote a book published by the Claretians and ECIP with this title - HANDUMANAN (REMEMBRANCE) - Digging for our Indigenous Wellspring. I was hoping there would be more of this as the year unfolded. In your video:

a. There is hardly any reference to the hundreds of revolts and insurrections across the more than 300 years of Spanish colonization. There was even a reference that one of the main reasons for this revolt was that the *baylans* were angry that their influence got eroded owing to what the friars were doing. Nothing could be farther from the truth, if you did your research well. (There is a Chapter in my book that details these revolts and most of them dealt with how oppressive the colonizers were vis-a-vis what they did with the *encomiendas*, *polos* and other forms of abuses.)

b. There is no critique at all in regard to how the friars handled the evangelization. Again it was not because of inculturation that they tapped into the cultural-faith practices of the people that then became the basis for the devotions which are now constitutive of our folk or popular religiosity. Instead, there is all these praises for the creative and courageous moves of the friars e.g. how good they were as community organizers, etc.

5. A last point I would like to raise is this. My sense is that those behind the video production would make the viewer feel that we do owe an *utang-na-loob* to the colonizers/friars for their contribution to our growth and progress. I beg to disagree. We do not owe the colonizers any *utang-na-loob*; in fact they are the ones who committed an *utang* to our ancestors. Look at the repercussion of the collapse of our ancestors' indigenous

belief system. Before the colonization, their belief system provided a cultural model which views their ecological surroundings as sacred. Land was a gift from the Deity and everything in it was sacred. Thus, our ancestors lived in peaceful co-existence with Mother Nature. But Colonization cum Christianity destroyed this cultural-belief matrix which began our people's alienation from nature as their conversion to Christianity made them susceptible to accepting the mode of production of feudalism. And when the American colonizers took over, it was easy to shift to the mode of capitalism which as we know today is what *Laudato Si* has severely critiqued. By giving up on our indigenous belief system, embracing the Western way of life (from Christianity to capitalism), it was just a matter of time before our forests would be destroyed; our lands would be converted to plantations; logging and mining would become buzz words for economic investments. And look who are suffering – all of us Filipinos, and in a special way the indigenous communities. So, this is how we have paid for our *utang-na-loob*?

There are more that I can comment on, but this is already taking too much space. So I end with one more note. We are made to understand that this is just the first Episode, that you are in the process of producing more. I am afraid that if you do not listen to the critique presented for Episode 1, there might be more flaws in your next Episodes.

Like you, I wish we can truly commemorate the 500 years in a manner that is meaningful. But I hope not at the expense of profiling our ancestors in a way that disrespect their memory.

Thanks for allowing me to share my thoughts in response to your video production.

God bless!

Sincerely yours,

Bro Karl Gaspar CSsR