

## A Tribute to José M. de Mesa

### Filipino, Theologian, Friend: Celebrating his Life, Remembering his Genius, Cherishing his Memory<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen Bevans

#### Introduction

We gather here today to remember and celebrate the life of a truly great man, José M. de Mesa. Joe, who died three years ago today on April 15, 2021, was a true Filipino, a brilliant and creative theologian, and a faithful friend—a faithful friend and more to his wife Yvonne, their children Dottie, Njel, and Rissa, to many if not all of you gathered here, and—since 1988—to me.

For the last three months or so I have immersed myself in Joe's writings. As I read through many of his works I marveled at his love of his country and culture and was amazed and dazzled by his theological breadth, depth, and creativity. His writings revealed once more to me his *kagandahang loob*, his beautiful inner self that Yvonne, his children, and his friends recognized and loved. I hope and pray that my words this morning will do some small justice to Joe's life—so well lived, and so soon taken from us.

As my title indicates and to which I have already alluded, my reflections will have three parts, although they are all interconnected and can only be distinguished, not separated. My first part will reflect on Joe's identity as a Filipino, the context in which he lived out his

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a talk given at a conference to honor the memory and work of José de Mesa. The conference was held on April 15, 2024, the third anniversary of his death. It was organized by Joe's wife, Yvonne, assisted by her three children: Dottie, Njel, and Rissa.

Christian faith, and imagined and constructed his theology. Then, in the second part, I'll try to bring together several key themes of his theology. Finally, I will reflect personally on Joe's and my friendship, hoping that in these personal reflections, all of you might experience a sacrament—what Joe called *bakas*—of your love and friendship with Joe. In my presentation, I will quote Joe liberally, so that we can hear his voice as clearly as possible as we celebrate, remember, and cherish his life today.

## **José de Mesa as Filipino: Celebrating His Life**

### ***A Love of Filipino Culture***

Joe loved Filipino culture. He loved being a Filipino. Joe lived out and understood his deep Christian faith in terms of his Filipino identity. Culture, he believed, is holy, and “cultural identity and integrity is a soteriological issue.”<sup>2</sup> When he discovered that God’s nature as love was best expressed in terms of Philippine culture and language as *kagandahang-loob* rather than mere *pag-ibig*, “I ‘felt,’” he wrote, “the goodness of the Good News and was drawn by its beauty. I was no longer just intellectually fascinated by it. I was personally touched by such an inculturated interpretation of revelation-faith, touched by God in and through my very own culture. I was grateful to God for the gift of a beautiful culture and which made me proud of belonging to it. Experiencing ‘the Holy’ in and through the ‘burning bush’ of the culture brought me to a deeper appreciation

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<sup>2</sup> José M. de Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” in José M. de Mesa, *José M. de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2016), 60.

of both the Gospel and of my culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Joe’s works are filled with references to popular religiosity or popular Catholicism in Philippine culture. He speaks fondly of the rituals of going to the cemetery on the feast of *Todos los Santos*, pilgrimages to Mount Banahaw, participating in the rituals and processions of *Semana Santa*, celebrating *Simbang Gabi*, and sharing the *Noche Buena* as a family after Christmas midnight Mass, the rich theology of the *Mahal na Pasyon*—although sometimes laced with an anti-Semitism that needs to be recognized and purified—and the consolation of kissing, touching, and wiping a statue like the *Santo Niño* of Cebu or the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. These practices and many more made up the “body language” and *pagpapadama* of Joe’s faith. These important practices and rituals, Joe recognized, are what made him fully human, fully Christian, and fully Filipino.<sup>4</sup>

### ***A Love of Filipino Language***

Joe’s love of his culture goes hand in hand with his love for his native language, Tagalog. Indeed, he writes, a vernacular language is the “voice of culture.”<sup>5</sup> He offers three “interrelated tasks” for inculturation: a recognition that any culture is relative to its particular time and

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<sup>3</sup> José M. De Mesa and David Jonathan Y. Bayot, “Introduction,” *A Theological Reader*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: De Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” 76-77; “Inculturation as Pilgrimage,” 5-7; José M. de Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity in Popular Catholicism,” in *A Theological Reader*, 507; Dennis T. González, ed. *José de Mesa’s Novena De Gallo: Paghahanda sa Araw ng Pasko sa Tahanan*, translated by Yvonne F. de Mesa (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2022).

<sup>5</sup> José M. de Mesa, “Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology,” in *A Theological Reader*, 121, 137, 158.

context, that culture is to be "destigmatized and revalued," and that "the Faith must be interpreted with indigenous categories." To this third task, he adds: "I insist to use the vernacular because it somehow ensures, no matter how another foreign language renders it, that substantially the cultural meaning is maintained. *Traduttore, tradittore*. The vernacular of a culture is the most distinctive feature of that culture. It is culture speaking in its own voice and expressing thoughts in its own terms."<sup>6</sup>

Joe explained in his introductory conversation with Jonathan Bayot in *A Theological Reader* how he proposed in one of his courses to teach only in Tagalog, even though not everyone in the class—composed of those who felt more comfortable in Ilocano or Cebuano—might feel uncomfortable at first. Let's just experiment, he said, and if the students didn't fully understand Tagalog after a month he would explain things in English. "Guess what? We never reverted back to using English. Their evaluation at the end of the term was '*mas maliwanag*' and '*mas nadama ko ang kurso*.'" They not only *understood* better; they *felt* that they understood. Using the Tagalog language spoke more to the students than English ever could have.<sup>7</sup> "If only we would shift our theological language from English to the vernacular, I'm sure that our process of creating a corpus of Filipino theology would be accelerated."<sup>8</sup> I know that Joe became more and more convinced of this in his latter years. He knew that he could only really do Filipino theology if he wrote and spoke in his beloved Tagalog. "I feel [note Joe's verb!] that Filipino has the capability and the capacity to become a theological language side by side with other theological languages. I feel that, in the face of the

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<sup>6</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader* 20

<sup>8</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader* 15-16.

experience of colonization whereby we internalized the feelings of inferiority, showing the beauty—the wisdom and genius—of our Filipino culture is the way to self-pride and self-confidence.”<sup>9</sup>

Joe’s written English is elegant. I do not know Tagalog, but I would imagine that his writing in Tagalog is even more elegant and heartfelt. Joe was Filipino to the core.

### **José de Mesa as Theologian: Celebrating his Genius**

“*Naglalakbay ako*. I am on a pilgrimage. In this intellectual journey, I’ve always dreamt of contributing significantly to the creation and development of an authentic Filipino theological tradition, unabashedly utilizing Filipino thought, and increasingly in the Filipino language. I have consciously taken the Filipino as my primary and inner guide to help me better understand ‘the Way of Jesus,’ the religious tradition I cherish.”<sup>10</sup> As a Christian *Filipino*, Joe brought his love of Filipino culture, religiosity, and language to bear on his life as a theologian. Filipino culture was his guide to reappropriating the Christian tradition.

#### ***A Knowledge of Tradition***

One of the reasons why Joe was such a great theologian was his rich and deep knowledge of the Christian tradition. He clearly understood that the tradition he had grown up with and had learned to master in graduate school was already inculturated in Western culture and in past times. But he knew as well that any real tradition is flexible, always growing, and including new ways of imagining and thinking, and only

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<sup>9</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” *A Theological Reader* 20.

<sup>10</sup> José M. de Mesa, “Preface,” *A Theological Reader*, vii.

makes sense in a particular cultural, historical, and social context. This is why he probed the meaning of tradition to discover its transforming meaning in the *culture and language* he loved so that it might illumine and transform the *people* he loved.

Joe's knowledge of the tradition is evident in his marvelous essay on the theology of marriage.<sup>11</sup> It is evident in his groundbreaking and illuminating reflection in which he proposes that the term *bakas* and its cognates express a more meaningful understanding of "sacrament" than the mere translation of "*sacramentum*" as "*sakramento*."<sup>12</sup> It is evident in his summary of traditional Trinitarian theology in a draft essay that he shared with me in 2013, in which "feeling" (*pagdama*) is evoked to capture the identity and mission of the Holy Spirit, "face" (*mukha*) is employed to speak meaningfully in Filipino context of the Word, Jesus, and the deepest, mysterious nature of a person (*loob*) captures in a particularly rich and Filipino way the Holy Mystery who is the Father.<sup>13</sup> Joe's knowledge of the tradition could show how the received tradition can be "relativized" so that the riches of Filipino culture and the Tagalog language could be "destigmatized and revalued."<sup>14</sup>

### ***Three Key Theological Terms***

Several Tagalog terms are key to expressing how Joe accomplishes this relativization, destigmatization, and revaluing of Filipino culture. They are *pagdama*,

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<sup>11</sup> José M. de Mesa, "The *Mysterion* Which is Marriage: A Vision for Marital Life," in *A Theological Reader*, 215-238.

<sup>12</sup> José M. de Mesa, "*Bakas*: Retrieving the Sense of Sacramentality in the Ordinary," *A Theological Reader*, 465-502.

<sup>13</sup> José M. de Mesa, *Adequate, But Not Enough: A Filipino Reflection on the Triune God* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2018).

<sup>14</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 15.

*kagandahang-loob*, and *ginhawa*. I've already referred to the first two. A brief reflection on each of these will reveal, I think, Joe's theological genius. Because it is a true genius, however, I would argue that Joe's theology not only illuminates the tradition for Filipinos. His reflections go beyond his context to illuminate Christian theology and faith for other cultures as well. I for one, for example, have been deeply touched by Joe's work, and it has led me into a deeper appreciation of my faith and helped me articulate my faith better in my theology. Joe spoke about this latter dynamic as "intertraditionality."<sup>15</sup>

### ***Pagdama***

We alluded to *pagdama* in the previous section of this presentation. Here we offer how Joe reappropriates this central Filipino way of knowing in a way that Filipinizes theology and religious practice and offers a contribution to the broader theological tradition. *Pagdama*, as of course you know, means "feeling" in English, but Joe would rather translate it as a "way of experiencing."<sup>16</sup> Joe was convinced that this is the way that Filipinos know the world, and know their faith. Rather than have a "worldview," Joe believes, Filipinos have a "world feel." "*Pagdama* is not just emotion; it is affective cognition or cognitive affection with a predilection for the affective." It "integrates cognition and feeling, where to know is to feel and to feel is to truly know." Joe compares *pagdama* with St. John Henry Newman's "illative sense."<sup>17</sup>

*Pagdama* is the soul of Filipino popular religion, a

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<sup>15</sup> De Mesa, "Bakas," *A Theological Reader*, 493-94; "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 505-506.

<sup>16</sup> De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 508. Joe also reflects briefly on *pagdama* in his essay "Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology," *A Theological Reader*, 80-83.

<sup>17</sup> De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 508.

true *locus theologicus* or theological source for Filipinos, to allude to a statement by Pope Francis.<sup>18</sup> “Prayer in popular Catholicism is uttered by the body in its various movements and gestures. This is most likely the reason why people wipe the statues of Jesus and Mary, and other saints with a handkerchief or a small towel and then wipe themselves with it in turn: they want to ‘feel’ God making them experience Godself as they want God ‘to feel’ their faith.”<sup>19</sup> Such an experiential, heartfelt faith, Joe implies, is how one might present faith in a Filipino context. It is not so much an intellectual believing, but an affective trust, an offering of the heart. Faith is not so much believing statements in a catechism, but a warm attachment to a person, a movement of the heart, not just of the mind.

Joe suggests that this defining aspect of Filipino knowing, while it offers a crucial perspective on Filipinos' faith, can also serve as a way of knowing theological and religious truths that can serve the broader church. A classic Western understanding of faith revolves around "orthodoxy," or "right thinking." In the 1970s Latin American liberation theologians offered another, powerful dynamic to faith knowledge in the form of "orthopraxis," or "right action." As one prominent liberation theologian expresses it, "To know the truth is to do the truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus, to know sin is to take away sin, to know suffering is to free the world from suffering, to know God is to go to God in justice."<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the centrality of *pagdama* to

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 126.

<sup>19</sup> De Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity,” *A Theological Reader*, 510-11.

<sup>20</sup> Jon Sobrino, “El conocimiento teológico en la teología europea y latinoamericana,” in *Liberación y cautiverio: debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina* (Mexico City: Comité Organizador, 1975), 207.



Filipino faith knowledge, Joe proposes that a truly Filipino way of believing could be called "orthopathy," or "right feeling." If such an understanding "is incorporated into a Filipino tradition of Catholicism, it may pave the way for enhancing our sense of connectedness and solidarity, heightening our capacity for discernment in complex ethical situations, and deepening our understanding of sacramentality. In addition, such a tradition of the Catholic faith may indicate also a theological reality that has not been considered adequately as of today: the humanizing role of feeling in living and understanding our faith."<sup>21</sup>

I think Joe was right on the money here. Interestingly, last November Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter entitled *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, which I have translated as "In Order to Move Theology Forward." Francis calls for a new way of doing theology, based on a new way of thinking, more focused on wisdom and spirituality than logic and reason. He calls for a theology that "should *enlarge its boundaries in the direction of wisdom*, in order not to be dehumanized and impoverished. Along this path, theology can contribute to the current discussion of "rethinking the nature of thinking," demonstrating that it is *a truly critical way of knowing in that it is sapiential knowing*, not abstract and ideological, but spiritual, worked out on one's knees, grounded in adoration and prayer; it is a transcendent knowledge and, at the same time, attentive to the voice of the people, therefore "popular" theology . . ." <sup>22</sup>

I'm sure that Pope Francis would read Joe's work with much relish!

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<sup>21</sup> De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 511.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *motu proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, 7. My translation.

### ***Kagandahang-Loob***

One of the most beautiful of Filipino concepts is that of *loob*, the deepest self, the fullest reality of a person, one's true character. Joe, like many other Filipino philosophers and theologians, wrote eloquently of *loob*. "*Loob*," Joe writes, "...is the core of one's personhood and where the true worth of the person lies. It is what makes the person what he/she is and who he/she is as a person. The *loob* is the very zone of creaturehood which is the substratum of ideas, feelings, and behavior. To speak of the *loob*, then, is to speak of the person as a whole."<sup>23</sup>

*Loob* is a relational concept. An evil person is said to be of "*masamang loob*," but "a good person is said to be of *magandang loob* (literally, a beautiful inner self) or alternatively of "*mabuting loob*" (literally, a good inner self) because he/she generally relates well and positively to others."<sup>24</sup> A truly good person, however, is more than simply good, since "there is a kind of goodness . . . which is cold and unattractive. Holy people who have no human warmth, for instance, tend to repel rather than to attract." *Kagandahang loob* is true goodness. It is *maganda*, beautiful, "goodness which is warm, approachable, and winsome . . ." Jesus, Joe observes, is called the "beautiful (*kalos* in Greek) shepherd."<sup>25</sup>

Joe describes *kagandahang-loob* as having several characteristics. It points to the fact that a person can only be known by her or his relationships with others. A person of *kagandahang-loob* acts out of freedom; she or he acts not because she or he has to, but simply out of an inner generosity of spirit. In this way, the person of *kagandahang-loob* is other-oriented. His or her

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<sup>23</sup> José M. de Mesa, "Jesus: The Revelation of God's *Kagandahang Loob*," *A Theological Reader*, 302.

<sup>24</sup> De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303.

<sup>25</sup> De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303.

generosity asks for nothing in return but looks only for the good of others. It is simply overflowing, even excessive. A person is usually perceived as "beautiful" not as a result of a one-off encounter, but over time, as his or her *loob* manifests itself. A person of *Kagandahang-loob* is a person of deep authenticity, of spontaneous kindness.<sup>26</sup>

In the essay from which I have been quoting, Joe describes Jesus as the person *par excellence* of *Kagandahang-loob*. He matches up perfectly with all these characteristics, and so reveals to humanity in his own humanity the true nature of God.<sup>27</sup> In another essay on Revelation and Faith in Philippine context, Joe expresses it this way: "Perhaps, for Filipinos, *kagandahang-loob* is primarily "pure positivity" (Schillebeeckx) that captivates and wins people over. Surely, this is a reminder for us of someone who 'went around doing good' (Acts 10:38). It refers to a goodness that is not cold but warm, a kindness that is not enslaving but liberating."<sup>28</sup>

This is who God is. This is what God's Revelation is ultimately about. "Following this cultural manner of thinking," Joe writes, "revelation as God's action can be articulated as *pagpapadama ng Diyos ng Kanyang kagandahang-loob*: God making us experience His/Her most authentic, winsome, beneficent, relational self." Revelation places us in a relation with God in God's *kagandahang-loob*, and "the experienced effect of this relationship, a communion of the most authentic relational selves of God and people, is *ginhawa*, that is,

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<sup>26</sup> De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303-7.

<sup>27</sup> De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 307-14.

<sup>28</sup> José M. de Mesa "Communicating 'Revelation-Faith' with Culture in Mind," *A Theological Reader*, 324.

an overall sense of well-being.”<sup>29</sup>

It is to this concept of *ginhawa* that we turn to next.

### *Ginhawa*

In an essay entitled “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” Joe proposes that a richer understanding of “salvation” might be better expressed for Filipinos in the word (and its variations) of *ginhawa*, rather than *kaligtasan*. In developing his argument, Joe begins from the biblical tradition, noting that “the notion of salvation is rooted in *earthly* realities.”<sup>30</sup> It is a notion that signifies how women and men are freed from individual stress and worry in times of danger, injustice, and sickness, or from community dangers of war, political upheaval, or famine. Gradually, this very concrete idea becomes a metaphor for freedom from spiritual hindrances to full humanity, and a metaphor as well for the full flourishing of all of humanity when the Kingdom—of as I prefer to speak of it, the “Kin-dom” of God<sup>31</sup>—finally becomes a reality in history. Given this biblical background, Joe then investigates the meaning of *ginhawa*. *Ginhawa* has meanings similar to that of the Bible. It is rooted as well in earthly realities. It could mean living a life of ease, free from pain and sickness or difficulty, being consoled in times of grief, and a basic freedom from want. If one thinks of salvation in terms of freedom, safety, and well-being, *ginhawa* has the connotation of being freed from

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<sup>29</sup> De Mesa, “Communicating ‘Revelation-Faith,’” *A Theological Reader*, 325.

<sup>30</sup> José M. de Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 332.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen B. Bevans, *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024), 12-13.

any *hirap*.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, Joe writes, using the word *ginhawa* is a way of speaking about the total well-being of humanity in the embrace of God. In our own time, we can press Joe a bit forward to say that it is about the full well-being and flourishing of all of creation, healed from the destruction that humanity in its greed has caused—in the Philippines and all over the world.

It makes good theological sense then, Joe concludes, that Jesus is the source of *ginhawa*. Jesus embodies, demonstrates, and proclaims this reality in his life and ministry. He brings “salvation to sinners and indeed to all [peoples—and I would say, to all of creation].”<sup>33</sup> “It is only in following Jesus and committing ourselves to Him that real *kaginhawahan* is possible. ‘Come to me, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy, and I will give you relief. Bend your necks to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and your souls will find relief. For my yoke is good to bear, my load is light (Mt. 11:28-30).”<sup>34</sup>

If I may bring all three key terms together, thinking of salvation as *ginhawa* is a way to help Filipinos *feel* the *kagandahang-loob* of God as offering the full healing, full forgiveness, full flourishing, and full transformation to all women and men, and to all creation. This was accomplished in Jesus’s ministry, suffering, death, and sharing with us his resurrected new life. It is this new life, this *bagong buhay*, that Christians are called to share with the whole world.

Joe has offered much more in the creation of a richly expressed and richly felt Filipino theology. I can only hint

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<sup>32</sup> De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 333-35.

<sup>33</sup> De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 333.

<sup>34</sup> De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” 345-46.

at this in what I have said so far. I do hope, however, that my words can give a sense of Joe as a theologian of uncommon ability to capture the spirit of his people and to illumine the constant presence of God in the culture and language that he so loved.

### **José de Mesa as Friend: Cherishing His Memory**

True to his identity as a Filipino, Joe loved people. He was relational to the core. Joe's first love, of course, was his family—his beloved wife Yvonne, and his three children Dottie, Njel, and Rissa. My sense is that Yvonne, besides being Joe's lifelong partner in marriage, was also his best friend. "I am very lucky," Joe wrote in the Introduction to *A Theological Reader*, "that my wife affirmed and supported my love for theology. She has been my constant fellow traveler on this journey, helping me in editing what I wrote."<sup>35</sup> Several years before, in the Acknowledgements to his book *Why Theology is Never Far From Home*, Joe wrote that "I would like to thank most of all my wife, Yvonne, and our children . . . for more than putting up with a theology in their midst. They have made, by their affection and support, studying and writing both congenial and worthwhile."<sup>36</sup> Yvonne and his children have been companions—*mga kasama*—on his pilgrimage in the "creation of a Filipino theological tradition," and so beloved *kaibigan*.

But, as Joe has written in his Introductions and Acknowledgments, he has had many more companions on his journey: Frank De Graeve, SJ in Leuven, Paul Van Parijs, CICM at Maryhill School of Theology, Lode Wostyn, CICM, with whom he wrote some of his first books, Anscar Chupungco, OSB of Maryhill, Geoffrey King, SJ, of the EAPI, Andrew González, FSC, William

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<sup>35</sup> De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> De Mesa, *Why Theology Is Never Far From Home*, xi.

Garvey, FSC, and Carmelita Quebengco of De La Salle University. Joe taught hundreds of students at Maryhill, EAPI, De La Salle, Catholic Theological Union, and the International Congregation Center, and many other places throughout the world. I know that many of you here today were Joe's students and friends, and you know how much he cared about you and cared for you.

Joe mentions me as well in the Acknowledgments of *A Theological Reader* as "a close friend and a stimulating conversation partner in this theological journey."<sup>37</sup> As the Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union, I invited Joe several times to come to CTU to be the "Luzbetak Visiting Professor." As you can imagine, the students raved about Joe—his passion, his creativity, his chalk talk. Many told me that it was the best course they had had at CTU. When he visited, Joe stayed in our SVD community in Chicago, and I look back gratefully and humbly on many wonderful conversations, especially at breakfast and late at night around our kitchen table. I remember Joe's love of ice cream and his love of making it—sugar-free, of course! My favorite flavor was pistachio, and one time he even made it for me when I had dinner at his and Yvonne's house in Cainta.

I look back gratefully and joyfully, remembering our "Luzbetak excursions" to Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln lived and worked before becoming the President of the United States, to Mundelein Seminary to see in brick and mortar the dreams of Chicago's Cardinal George Mundelein, and to downtown Chicago to see *The Lion King* and *Wicked*. Joe inscribed my copy of *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* with the following words: "I count as a great blessing on my 25<sup>th</sup> year as a theologian my having been a Luzbetak Visiting Professor

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<sup>37</sup> De Mesa, "Acknowledgments," *A Theological Reader*, xi.

at CTU last Spring. Even greater is your friendship which made my stay so much more meaningful. In friendship, Joe." On Easter, 2003, Joe gifted me with a copy of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his inscription, he wrote "Many are the wonderful tales of Narnia, so are the tales of a Luzbetak visiting professor. This is thanks to such tales! Maraming, maraming salamat, Steve. Joe.

Ours was a truly wonderful friendship. It's hard to express what Joe meant to me, and how he enriched my life as a theologian, and especially as a person. I will always be grateful for his *kagandahang loob*, for his love of all things Filipino, for his theological passion and genius, for his sharing his family with me, and especially for his friendship. I am sure that many, most, perhaps all of you here this morning can say the same thing.

## Conclusion

Hard to express as well is the honor I feel [note the word!] in presenting these reflections to remember and honor Joe. I hesitated to accept the honor. I told Yvonne when she invited me to do this that the task should go to a Filipino and that this talk should be in Tagalog. But Yvonne insisted, and so here I am. I hope Joe approves!

As I said at the beginning of this presentation, I hope that my words have done some small justice to the theological giant we honor in this conference. I think the best way to honor Joe, however, is to continue his project of developing a truly Filipino theology and theological tradition. There is much to do, much to learn, much to discover. Through your work, let Joe's pilgrimage continue.



**About the Author**

Stephen Bevans is a priest in the missionary congregation of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). He is the Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD Professor of Mission and Culture, Emeritus, at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, USA. He has published and edited over twenty books, among which are *Models of Contextual Theology*, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, and, with Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. His latest book is *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church* (Orbis Books). He and Roger Schroeder are currently working on a book on Missiology as Attraction. Email address: sbevans@ctu.edu