

The Role of Mary Magdalene in the Easter “Salubong”: A Religious Exploration

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Abstract –The resurrection is the most important event in Christian faith and is flamboyantly celebrated yearly in the Philippines through the Salubong religious practice. This popular religiosity displays the Filipino Catholics’ inherent love for Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. The symbolic meeting between a resurrected son and his bereaved mother is a manifestation of the Filipinos’ deep-down value for the family, devotion to parents, and respect for elders. While this is a remarkable trait, an important figure, Mary Magdalene, and the other committed women who stood for Jesus during those trying moments are not given the space they rightfully deserve in the liturgical occasion. This study is a religious exploration of the salubong practice in the Philippines. It investigates the role of Mary Magdalene during the resurrection event of Jesus. It concludes that Mary Magdalene is an important figure in the resurrection event as a witness and as an apostle to the apostles.

Keywords: salubong; Mary Magdalene; popular devotions; culture; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Filipinos are undeniably festive and, to some extent fond of religious rituals and merriments. The presence of many popular devotions in the Philippines is a manifestation of the Filipinos’ innate longing for religious revelries. In the process of Christianization, Filipinos embody traditional beliefs, modified and interpreted the elements of Christian faith [1]. Combined with local customs and beliefs, Filipinos are creative in interpreting and celebrating their religious traditions. The *Black Nazarene* in Quiapo, Manila, the *Penafrancia* in the Bicol region, the *Sinulog* and *Ati-atihan* in Cebu and Kalibo, Aklan are but some of the popular devotions that Filipinos love to celebrate. Filipinos have developed the culture of merging their religious faith with their indigenous beliefs. They reinterpret captivating their religion through their local cultural contexts. The *Salubong* is an interesting practice that Filipinos anticipate every year as their way of celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This paper investigates this religious phenomenon vis-à-vis Mary Magdalene, who, unfortunately on almost all occasions is missing in the event. The research review of literature about the *Salubong*, its history, and practice in conjunction with the colorful story of Mary Magdalene. Ideas from experts and proponents will be explored in delving into the details of the *Salubong* practice, on the one hand, and the interesting narrative concerning the life of Mary Magdalene whose story was tainted with many misinterpretations and misconceptions, on the other.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The ultimate objective of the study is to investigate the *Salubong* practice in the Philippines vis-à-vis the role of Mary Magdalene in the liturgical celebration. Specifically, the paper sought to answer the following questions: (1) How is the *Salubong* practiced in the Philippines? (2) How did the *Salubong* as a Filipino popular devotion originate? (3) What role can Mary Magdalene contribute to the Easter *Salubong* event? Why is she often missing in the liturgical celebration? (4) In what way are the roles of Mary Magdalene and the other faithful women disciples who stood for Jesus be recognized in the Easter event?

METHODS

The paper is qualitative research. The study employed a review of literature in exploring the intricate realm of the *Salubong* in the Philippines. Its origin, practice, and cultural features were investigated using ideas from available related sources. Given the limited time in conducting the study, the researcher opted for existing literature in the library and some online materials related to the topic. This study probed as well the intriguing background of Mary Magdalene who on many occasions is absent in the liturgical event on the resurrection. The researcher ventured into her flamboyant milieu and looked into the numerous misrepresentations that were attached to her in history. Ideas from experts and proponents were taken into account to come up with a biblically and historically accurate portrait of Mary Magdalene.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Salubong and the Filipino religious culture

A. The *Salubong* as a Filipino Celebration of Easter

The *Salubong* is a Filipino tradition celebrated in the break of day every Easter Sunday, wherein the images of the Risen Christ and his Sorrowful Mother “symbolically meet in a pre-dawn procession” [2]. Although the actual traditional *Salubong* happens right before dawn many preferred to celebrate it Saturday night for convenience. The word “*salubong*” is a Tagalog term which means “to welcome or to meet.” *Salubong* is observed in nearly all Catholic communities throughout the Philippines. In Lago (2012), the event is very well observed in Cebu, Angono in Rizal, Pampanga, and Naga in Camarines Sur. *Salubong* refers to the “meeting of two images, one of the Risen Christ, and the other of his still bereaving mother Mary” [3]. The effigy of Mary, overlaid with a black lamenting cloth, is held by the female devotees by one route along with sculptures of the saints who went with Jesus in his ministry. The statue of the Risen Christ is carried by the male followers going to an opposite course. Then the two processions meet at the church.

In Angono, Rizal, as noted by Sanchez the *Salubong* usually commences before dawn between 3 am to 4 am [4]. Dela Cruz (2014) remarked that in Angono, Rizal the statue of the Risen Christ, accompanied by angels and by two women each playing the role of *kapitana* (female captain), is led out in a procession from the parish church to the site of a 20-foot high *Galilea* where the Easter encounter is to take place. In the interim, the image of Mary, with her mourning veil, is led through a different route to the place of encounter. She is escorted by another pair of women each playing the role of *tenyenta* (female lieutenant) [5].

In Pampanga, the Center for Kapampangan Studies, the most intricate *Salubong* (*Salubung* in Kapampangan) practices are held in front of the churches in the towns of Sto. Tomas and Minalin. Just before the daybreak, the brass band performs and an all-female choir sing Alleluia as the two images (Resurrected Christ and his mother Mary) are positioned face to face. A young girl dressed as an angel does not emerge instantaneously but hidden inside a “*pusu-pusu*” (heart-shaped giant banana flower) which grandly unwraps in five stages, one layer of petals at a time. Each opening is ceremoniously accompanied by the choir and the band. After the *salubong* (also called *pusu-pusuan* in these parts), the people go inside the church for the Easter Mass [2].

B. Cultural Dimension of the *Salubong*

Culture is an influential aspect of understanding religious faith. Mercado even noted that culture and religion are inseparable because one is a part of the other [7]. De la Cruz (2014) noted that the *Salubong* practice is an exceedingly cultural practice that is embedded in the psyche of the Filipinos. Culture and tradition for that reason play an important role in the celebration of the *Salubong* [5]. It is a manifestation of the value Filipinos assign to the family. The Filipino psyche has this tradition of the son being attached to his mother. In the Philippines, the first person you run to is the mother. The *Salubong* is based on that belief that the first thing Jesus did after he was resurrected was gone to the Blessed Mother [8]. For the Filipinos, the joyful reunion between a bereaved mother and a son is a remarkable encounter, and it is what is highlighted in the *Salubong*. Culturally, Filipinos are usually “child-and family-centered with the family as the most influential social unit” [9]. A significant value is placed on respect for the authority of parents within the Filipino family. That is why in the *Salubong*, the meeting of Jesus and his mother Mary is what is emphasized or underscored. The *Salubong* is a typical example of a folk religiosity or folk Catholicism that is rooted in culture. Filipinos have started to create a Catholicism in harmony with their way of life as a people. The interpretation of the Resurrection event which is being celebrated in the *Salubong* is cultural rather than biblical. The *Salubong* is rooted in the cultural traditions of Filipinos and is observed by the majority of the devotees [10].

C. Origin of the *Salubong*

The *Salubong* as an elated meeting between Jesus and his mother in the post the resurrection narrative is not mentioned in the Scriptures. It may possibly have originated from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in the 16th century through the Jesuit missionaries of the Spanish colonial period [11]. It might have possibly originated from the Filipino popular interpretation of the resurrection, i.e., the resurrected Jesus would have appeared first to his lamenting mother. This interpretation is indeed, to some degree, suitable to the Filipino who regards it as usual and even humanly customary for anyone to be emotionally attached to his or her mother. Dela Cruz argues that if Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection it is similarly possible that he appeared likewise if not firstly to his still grieving mother to comfort her. Such an appearance of Jesus to his mother and consequently the *Salubong* appears to be

more relevant to the Filipino mind [5].

Another theory of the *Salubong* tradition is that the commitment of Spanish missionaries to teach the Catholic faith to the still "un-evangelized" Filipinos. The Jesuits missionaries were the innovators in making use of "dramatic and semi-dramatic forms as valuable pedagogical methods to spread the Catholic faith" [11]. They employed this technique in their ardent missionary activity to evangelize the Filipinos. For that reason, there are three contributing strands in the development of the *Salubong* according to Dela Cruz: "1) the Spanish popular belief, 2) the Filipino popular understanding, and 3) the imaginative technique of the missionaries to evangelize" [5]. These three creatively blended and interwoven elements manifest the Filipino reinterpretation of Christianity which is articulated in the popular religiosity ritual called the *Salubong*.

On Mary Magdalene

Beavis stated that "the traditional image of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute and the alleged speculations that she was a priestess are quite misguided" [12]. This section investigates who Mary Magdalene is in the Scriptures, history, and in recent studies.

A. Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels

In the New Testament Mary Magdalene is perceived to be a character as one of Jesus' most dedicated supporters. Cacho noted that "she appears consistently in the four gospels, and she does so as a witness to the most Christological significant moments" [13]. The four gospels outstandingly concur about her occurrence in the significant events in Jesus' life [14,15,16]. Some scholars consider her as the first true witness to the resurrection and a first proclaimer of the good news [12, 17,18,19]. Most scholars agree that "she may have well understood what Jesus said and did even before Peter and the other disciples realized this truth" [13].

The scriptures have no record of her being recognized as a prostitute or a known sinner. The Bible presents her as a major figure to the most significant events of Christian faith. For Schenk, "it was not possible, to relate the story of the Resurrection without including Mary, the one from Magdala" [14].

Mary Magdalene, as the name suggests was born in Magdala, which is along the Sea of Galilee [20]. In the Gospel of Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3, Mary Magdalene journeyed with Jesus in the Galilean ministry. Johnson and Schenk stated that in the synoptic gospels, "Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus' death, burial, the empty tomb, and his resurrection" [14, 18].

The Gospels of Matthew (27:55-56), Mark (15:40-41) and Luke (8:2-3) revealed that she belonged to a number of Galilean women who followed and supported Jesus in his ministry [11, 21]. The Synoptic gospels juxtapose Jesus' abandonment by his male followers during his arrest but was nevertheless not deserted by his faithful women disciples who were led by Mary Magdalene (cf. Matthew 27: 55-56; Mark 15: 40; Luke. 23: 49). The Synoptic Gospels also recorded that these women helped in bringing Jesus' body to the tomb (See Matthew 27: 61; Mark.15: 47; Luke.23: 55).

Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9 narrated that Jesus healed Mary Magdalene from the seven demons, possibly denoting that Jesus treated her from a bodily illness instead of the widespread view that she was freed from evil spirits. In Johnson the "cleansing from seven demons" has nothing to do with being a public sinner or prostitute. The four gospels do not mention any of it whatsoever [18]. Petruzello similarly stated that "the gospels disclose her to be of practical character" [20]. Biblical critics typically perceived Mary Magdalene as different from Mary of Bethany in John 12 who washed Jesus' feet and from the penitent woman in Luke 7 whom Jesus forgave for anointing him in the same way.

B. A Mistaken Identity

It is noted in Beavis (2012) and Schenk (2011) that the biblical description of Mary Magdalene as a woman apostle, financial supporter of Jesus' ministry and a proclaimer of Jesus' gospel stands in a diminutive stature compared to the "western cultural typecast of a repentant sinner" [12, 14]. The perception that she lived an immoral life prior to meeting Jesus appears to be the result of a mix-up between an unidentified woman, labeled as "a sinner," who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7, and another Mary from Bethany in John 12 who washed Jesus' feet when he was eating dinner. These two women mentioned in Luke and in John are depicted differently: The "sinner" in Luke's gospel seems unwanted at a dinner celebration in Capernaum (c.f. Luke 7:1 and Luke 7; 36). In the version of the gospel of John, the story happened in Bethany, and Mary is portrayed as a beloved friend of Jesus who washed Jesus's feet in gratefulness for raising Lazarus back to life, and Jesus links her act of dedication with his burial (See John. 12:7). Beavis (2013) remarked that even though the gospels narrate stories about women who anoint Jesus none of them is ascertained as Mary Magdalene (See: Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-1). Beavis further goes:

"There are several references in post-biblical tradition to the sisters Martha and Mary of

Bethany visiting the tomb and meeting with the risen Jesus, which led some early Christians to conclude that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same people. Eventually, the composite "Mary" figure was expanded to include the anonymous sinner of Luke 7:36-50, whose story is told immediately before Luke lists Jesus' women disciples from Galilee: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna" [12].

In 581 A.D, Pope Gregory the Great firmly declared that the "sinner" in Luke, Mary from Bethany, and Mary of Magdala refer to the same woman [12]. Despite not being referred directly as a sinner, the "seven demons" was interpreted by Pope Gregory as the entirety of vices and the oil used to anoint Jesus' feet had sensual connotations. Consequently, the "legend" of Mary Magdalene as a beautiful, vain, and an immodest young woman saved from a sinful life by Jesus turned out to be a prevailing thinking among western Catholic Christians. Interestingly, the eastern (Orthodox) Christians maintained to distinguish Mary Magdalene from Mary of Bethany and regard them as two distinct saints. Neither of them is identified with Luke's sinner in the Eastern Orthodox Church [12].

Why are contemporary Christians unacquainted about Mary Magdalene's strong fidelity and compelling leadership role in the early church? Pope Gregory's alleged misinterpretation of "seven demons" and "mixed-up" of characters may have contributed to the ignorance of most Christians during the patristic period. Schenk noted that by the year 312 C.E, when Constantine the Great declared Christianity the official religion of the empire, the Christian community was wedged in a cultural divergence when it shifted from domestic worship in household churches where women's leadership was recognized to public worship in places where women's leadership violated the social codes of honor and shame of the Romans [14]. In the fourth century, male church leaders at the Council of Laodicea suppressed women leadership since women were perceived to be created as inferior to men. Consequently, the image of Mary of Magdala was shifting from that of a fervent woman 'disciple-leader' and proclaimer of the resurrection to an image of a "repentant prostitute and public sinner." Some scholars consider this to be deliberate to discourage female leadership in the church [12]-[14], [22]. Given these factors, the real identity of Mary Magdalene and the significant role women played during Jesus' public ministry and throughout the infant church gradually faded from historical memory. The

misidentification of Mary Magdalene as a transformed public sinner achieved official status ever since. Mary of Magdala, from this day forward, turned out to be known in the western church as a malevolent woman in need of repentance, and not as an ardent woman leader who followed Jesus, "first witnessed his resurrection," and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. Remarkably, the Eastern Church at no time referred to her as a harlot, but as a respected "apostle to the apostles" throughout their history and cultural milieu.

C. Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

Scholars today have reestablished the correct perception of Mary Magdalene as an important Christian figure in the early church. As the first witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene is now regarded "the Apostle to the Apostles" [23]. Pope Francis through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments decreed the elevation of the celebration of St. Mary Magdalene to a feast day commemorated every twenty second of July. St. Mary Magdalene now is to be given honor as an apostle similarly like the other apostles. The decree is situated in the current ecclesial context which invites everyone to reflect more sincerely on the role and dignity of women [24]. Pope John Paul II was the one who dedicated eminent concern not only to the dignity and significance of women in Christ's mission but as well as the distinctive accent on Mary Magdalene's role as "first witness of the Risen Christ and the first messenger of his Good News to the apostles" [24]. Christians regardless of gender, race, linguistic and cultural backgrounds are therefore called to proclaim "the good news" of God's gracious goodness to humanity.

The Filipino experience of the *Salubong* and Mary Magdalene

The mutual yet critical dialogue between culture and Judeo-Christian Tradition (JCT) begins with culture since it is there where the experience of the Gospel message is understood locally through the people's experiences [10]. It is remarkably poignant to commence such an endeavor with human experience since it is close to the hearts of the people. It is where the Gospel message is more meaningful and relevant. The culture should no longer be understood from a classical and scholastic perspective but in an empirical one. It should be anthropological rather than philosophical [25]. Culture is something that is embedded in the people's psyche and it is understood contextually depending on the people's circumstances. There cannot be just one

culture for everyone since people come from different contexts and a universal norm for everyone is quite incomprehensible [25]. So the starting point in understanding a folk religiosity is not the pole of JCT but from the standpoint of culture. It is there where such religiosity is rooted. *Salubong* is an interesting phenomenon to explore in this particular regard.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Salubong* is a Filipino cultural practice of the Resurrection. Despite being exceptionally cultural rather than biblical, it is nevertheless a compelling and dramatic expression of the Resurrection event. Culture, which for de Mesa is not a hindrance, but a guide and a rich source of evidence in understanding the message of the Gospel in the local circumstances of the people [10]. It is a doorway to the psyche and experience of people who are making sense of their faith. Interestingly, Mary Magdalene who is an important figure in the resurrection event as a witness and as an apostle to the apostles is a posture that has to be considered. Her courage and single-minded commitment to Jesus was evident in her life when she was sent to proclaim the good news even when women were not taken seriously at that time [13]. She deserves a place in the event, together with other women whose fervent fidelity empowered them to stay and not abandon Jesus in those agonizing moments. Hence, a further critical study on this topic is recommended for future endeavors.

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