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Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions & the Making of a Filipino Universal

DEIRDRE DE LA CRUZ

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In March 1989, a transgender woman named Judiel Nieva reported that the Virgin Mary appeared to her atop a guava tree in the town of Agoo in the Philippine province of La Union. After much initial fanfare, a theological commission of the Roman Catholic Church declared the apparition as *Constat de Non Supernaturalitate*, or “clearly evident to be not supernatural.” In the 20 years since then, however, Filipino devotees to the Virgin Mary have continued to flourish, with some even making pilgrimages in different Marian shrines in and outside the country. Based on the *Catholic Directory of the Philippines*, more than 800 parishes nationwide are dedicated to the Virgin Mary as its titular patron. It is perhaps too simplistic say that the Marian devotion in the Philippines has persisted simply because of the intensity of Filipinos’ religious faith. What underlies the continued devotion to the Virgin Mary in the largest Roman Catholic nation in Asia?

Deirdre de la Cruz’s *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions & the Making of a Filipino Universal* is a meticulous historical and ethnographic examination of the devotion to the Virgin Mary. It is published at a time in which the Catholic Church in the Philippines is embarking upon a 9-year spiritual journey that will culminate in the commemoration of the 500 years of Catholicism in the Philippines (Palma 2012). The book’s publication also finds resonance amidst Pope Francis’s radical new evangelization, which places great emphasis on the vibrancy of religious life among Catholic communities in the Global South.

This book has many important and significant key points which are approached from a number of angles using close textual analysis of church records and other historical documents. One important theme is the interaction between religion, the mass media, and lay actors in shaping

Marian devotion in the Philippines. This discussion unfolds throughout the book's three main parts, which are framed under the headings "images," "visions," and "mass movements." From the outset, De la Cruz offers a very clear explanation of how the chapters are organized. And with her extensive fieldwork, she shows how passionately she is involved in her research, which involved her traveling widely to various churches, convents, libraries, and archives around the Philippines, Spain, and the United States.

Aside from a very useful introduction that outlines the framework and structure of book, the first two chapters recount the historical episodes and contemporary relevance of Marian apparitions and the devotion to the Virgin Mary. Chapter 1 examines the tripled meaning of the word "image" through a discussion of the physical appearance of religious imagery and its resemblance to published apparition stories and miracle narratives during the nineteenth century. The "appearance," "disappearance," and "(re)discovery" allegories are parts of the complexity of many apparition stories like in the case of Our Lady of Caysasay or the story of Our Lady of Manaoag, both of which have similarities and differences to actual images. This chapter also examines the role of missionaries and mestizo assistants called *ladinos* on the production of hagiographies, sermons, prayer books, popular romances, and spiritual manuals (p. 27), particularly during the period of expanding print culture in that century.

Chapter 2 emplaces the apparition stories in their historical context, looking back at the rich Catholic history of the post-revolutionary Philippines. It traces how double translation takes place through the quasi-divine figure of the Virgin Mary and through the globally circulating concept of the nation, Inang Bayan (Mother Country or Motherland). With anti-Spanish forces growing in strength, Gregorio Aglipay, a former Catholic priest and the supreme bishop of the Philippine Independent Church, propagated the tale of Inang Bayan as the localized version of the Virgin Mary. The story of Inang Bayan first appeared in Aglipay's *Novenario de la Patria* (Novena of the Motherland) published in 1926, a prayer text that pays homage to the origins of the Philippine nation. The tale and the novena lay out the conditions for understanding the transformation of Marian devotion in the context of late colonial modernity (p. 60), which resonates with Vicente Rafael's (1988) work on how unique forms of Filipino ideas and practices emerged through the reinterpretation of symbols and signs.

Chapter 3 is about the apparition of the Virgin Mary in a Carmelite monastery in Lipa. The chapter narrates how the apparitions and miracles happened through the story of Teresita Castillo, a former Carmelite novice in a monastery of nuns in the province of Lipa. It also reveals some disturbing historical narratives in the history of the Lipa monastery site, including the account of how 500 male civilians were bayoneted and their bodies dumped into the brook near the newly built seminary during the 1945 Japanese Occupation. The seminary was subsequently burned to the ground and on that burned plot of land now stands the Carmelite monastery built in 1946. The massacre was linked to why some people did not believe Teresita's account of it was the Virgin

Mary that appeared before her. According to De la Cruz's interview: "All those that were killed by the Japanese there behind Lipa monastery, their spirits, maybe that's what appeared to Teresita" (p. 90).

The cover image of the book is a photograph of the 1948 miracle rose petal from Lipa, bearing the image of Mary and the infant Jesus. Transformed into a public event, chapter 4 examines the story behind the showering of petals and the 15 consecutive days of Mary's apparitions including coverage of its worldwide reception. There are claims that several petals yielded holy images and its wondrous potency is believed to cure illness by applying petals directly to the body or administering petal-infused water and petal-infused *estampitas* (p. 50). Like other sacred objects, whether mass-produced as souvenirs or as objects of veneration, the petals portray the accessibility of spiritual energy inherent in religious material culture (Bautista 2010). According to De la Cruz, "the petals were not ephemeral rumors or stories that would circulate by word of mouth. They are proofs of a most material sort, witnessed and possessed by not just one but by many. They were artifacts that appeared mysteriously in different conditions, that posed the greatest treat to the church effort's to contain what was rapidly becoming a mass phenomenon, making the showering of petals were made the focal point of the verdict" (p. 151).

Chapter 5 is about the Family Rosary Crusade (FRC), a church apostolate that became a source of a new form of appearance of Mary in the Philippines. "Please pray the rosary" is a public service announcement on national television networks in the Philippines produced by the FRC. Perhaps one of the longest running Catholic-theme television programs in the Philippines, the history of FRC is a history of localization in the age of the mass media, according to De la Cruz. Founded by Patrick Peyton, an Irish-American priest and miraculously cured by the Virgin Mary of his tuberculosis, FRC had grown into a full-fledged media Catholic ministry in the United States and in 1951 in the Philippines. Made accessible to millions of Filipinos, FRC used mass rallies, television, radio, public advertising, and films to propagate the devotion to the Virgin Mary through rosary prayer, transforming the mediascape of the Philippines. During the 1980s some Catholic charismatic movements used the same format of extensive reaching to followers, combining the unique interplay of mass media and community (Wiegele 2005).

The final chapter examines how and why Filipino Marian devotees have "gone global." This chapter clearly illustrates the importance of lay actors in the growth of the devotion to Mary, particularly after the 1986 People Power revolution. Some of the most important personalities and their Marian-related initiatives are discussed, including the likes of Maria Luisa Fatima Nebrida, founder of the Mary's Army to Save Souls (MASS) and also the organizer of the fluvial procession of Marian images in Pasig River that served as the model to the World Marian Regatta in New York City. There was also Lydia Sison, the founder of Rosary Theater, the world's first animated diorama on the life of Jesus, and June Keithley Castro, a Filipina journalist documentary film maker who produced a full-length feature on the apparitions of Mary in Lipa. Although many Filipinos continue

to advocate for Mary as a universal figure and less in her specific and local manifestations, De la Cruz argues that this universalism is distinctly Filipino. And with the increasing popularity of the devotion to Mary in Lipa, the Philippines could play an active role in propagating the fifth Catholic dogma to the Virgin Mary under the title Mary: Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate.

This book could reshape or revision the investigation into Marian apparitions in the Philippines, particularly in the more than 60 years since the Virgin Mary was said to appear to Teresita Castillo. The book offers much needed context to the recent four-page document by Filipino Archbishop Ramon C. Arguelles which officially confirmed the apparitions to have a “supernatural character” and “worthy of belief.” Significantly, this was the first approval by the local church of the apparition after the official statement delivered in 1951 by the church commission, stating that the evidences and testimonies exclude any supernatural intervention in the reported extraordinary happenings—including the shower of petals—of the Carmel of Lipa (p. 151). When Arguelles was appointed archbishop of Batangas, one of his immediate actions was to lift the ban on the devotion to the Virgin Mary under the title Mediatrix of All Grace. Based on the Council of Trent (1545–63), the local diocese is the primary authority to judge and declare the authenticity of apparitions of the Virgin Mary, on which the Vatican may later release an official declaration.

Overall, this is an excellent book for researchers and anyone interested in various investigations on the apparitions and miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines. This book not only recounts the basics of each apparition but also puts them in their historical and ethnographic context. *Mother Figured* is a very important contribution to the study of Marianism in the Philippines and to the worldwide devotion to the Virgin Mary more generally.

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