

Assessing the Relevance of the Perpetual Help Devotion in the Philippines Today: A View from the Social Sciences

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Introduction

The devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help is one of the latest additions in a long line of Catholic devotions that are widespread in the Philippines. The circumstances behind its fame is interesting: for example, it is one of the few forms of Marian piety that is not traceable to Spanish Catholicism. It was introduced in the Philippines after the Spanish colonial period, particularly in 1906 when the Redemptorists started their mission work here. It is thus a bit different from Catholic devotions to well-known icons like the *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje* in Antipolo City, the famous *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno* in Quiapo, Manila, and the revered *Santo Niño de Cebu*. Most of these devotions have strong identifications with certain localities and are considered as centerpieces in the life of towns and districts. The Perpetual Help devotion, however, is relatively recent, but this notwithstanding, it has captivated millions of Filipinos and is, without doubt, one of the most popular Catholic devotions in contemporary Philippine Catholicism. It is, in fact, quite rare for a typical parish *not* to recite the novena during Wednesdays, as devotees who cannot come to Baclaran Church would request novena schedules from their respective parishes.

The Perpetual Help devotion has been the subject of my research since 2009, when I was studying for my PhD in Sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS). As a sociologist, I was interested in finding out why this devotion has continued to draw so many people to Baclaran Church every Wednesday since the novena started in 1948. I wanted to situate the Perpetual Help devotion within the broader structural realities it finds itself in, because sociological research looks into the dynamics, resources, constraints and

opportunities that shape the character and outcome of a social product. It is already common talk that the Perpetual Help devotion is popular and even “phenomenal”, but I am convinced that its popularity is not self-evident and needs to be adequately explained. Because of this interest, the almost year-long research has brought me to the main church, candle chapel, convent and the Vinteres Hall, church archives, and even to the parking lot. It has also brought me to the narrow streets and stalls in Baclaran, where much of everyday activities were happening. This research has also brought me closer to countless documents, pictures, priests, devotees, local officials, police and merchants, and the stories that they tell. Particularly important are the samples of devotional letters that have been kept in the archives of Baclaran Church, with earliest letters dating back to as early as 1948. These letters were the windows to the “deep center” of the Perpetual Help devotion, which is filled with the struggles, triumphs and aspirations of millions of devotees spanning almost seven decades.

In the course of the study, I found that there is no simple answer to the question of why the Perpetual Help devotion has remained so popular despite changes that have occurred in the course of decades. I believe that this question brings us to various trajectories of inquiry. In this paper, I will look into three specific dimensions: first, I assess the “Baclaran phenomenon” as a product of continuous adaptation to the challenge of new circumstances. I also look at prayer, the heart of any devotion, as a mirror by which devotees can more clearly see their connection with others, both human and divine. Lastly, I investigate how devotion transcends a purely transactional mode of relationship and yields to continuous cycle of petition and thanksgiving, which is the essence of the devotional relationship.

The ‘Baclaran’ phenomenon

The label “Baclaran phenomenon” is the usual description used when referring to the success of the Perpetual Help devotion. This claim needs to be understood and set in its proper context. When the claim is made that the Perpetual Help devotion is “phenomenal”, a

question may be asked: in what way is it “phenomenal”? The immediate response to that would be a look at numbers, albeit anecdotally. The Perpetual Help devotion is noticeable because of the number of devotees regularly going to the shrine. Estimates of the number of devotees vary, but the one suggested by Fr. Luis Hechanova (1998) is reasonable: about 100,000 devotees flock to the shrine on any given Wednesday, and it swells to 120,000 during first Wednesdays of the month.



Figure 1. Devotees flocking around the *carroza* bearing an icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help during the annual procession during her feast day (Photo taken by researcher on June 27, 2010)

From a sociological point of view, the numbers are just the surface of a broader reality. The broader question has something to do with how the Perpetual Help devotion has maintained its relevance throughout the years. In this regard, historical context is important because, as the records show, Baclaran Church was never intended by the Redemptorists to be a pilgrimage site, and the crowds of devotees going there at present actually mask its humble beginnings. Before the onset of urban development, Baclaran district was a fishing

village. Its name is derived from “baclad”, which is a rattan fence used by fishermen to protect fish before they are brought to the market. The Redemptorists built a chapel in Baclaran in 1932 and conducted mission work with fisher folk and their families. The first missionaries took the fisher folk’s spiritual and temporal needs as the defining feature of their work. This is the reason why Baclaran Church, during this time, did not function as a pilgrimage site. Its location, away from highly urbanized Manila, further contributed to its low-key position.

What placed the shrine to its present status as a pilgrimage site of national proportions is the Perpetual Novena devotion, which was started in 1948. In just a few months after it was introduced, devotees significantly increased until the small chapel cannot accommodate them anymore. An expansion of the chapel was finished in 1949 and it increased the space inside the church to accommodate 600 worshipers more than its former capacity (Maguire 2005). This expansion, however, still failed to provide enough space for devotees, so an expansion of the church was done again in 1952, which is the one currently standing. The finished church was consecrated on December 1, 1958 by Manila Archbishop Rufino Santos, but nine months prior to this, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) elevated Baclaran Church to the status of a *National Shrine*. This is a recognition that the Perpetual Help devotion has become significantly popular, and that Baclaran Church is the spiritual center of this devotion nationwide.

The 1948 Perpetual Novena devotion format used in Baclaran Church was a product of its time and reflects typical Catholic temperament of that period. The prayers used were similar to others then used in the United States (Kelly & Kelly 1998; Hechanova 1998). The theme of the prayers generally focused on personal sanctification and holiness of devotees. There are several petitions on worthy reception of the sacraments, avoiding occasions of sin and perseverance in prayer, forgiving one’s enemies; and the conversion of non-Catholics.

There were references to everyday needs too, but most of the prayers were focused on spiritual needs. The novena text remained the same for around twenty-five years, and a new set of prayers was introduced in 1973. The revised novena of 1973 adapted to the conditions of the times, just after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and during a period of political tenseness in the country because of martial law. The 1973 novena shares certain features with its 1948 counterpart, but the prayers emphasized themes connected to social justice and peace to balance the emphasis on personal needs. One finds in the prayers references to the need to be aware of broader social concerns (Kelly 1973). Consider this portion of the novena prayer:

While praying for our own intentions and for the intentions of all here present at this Novena, we earnestly ask you, our Mother, to help us comfort the sick and the dying, give hope to the poor and unemployed, heal the broken-hearted, lighten the burden of the oppressed, teach justice to their oppressors, and bring back to God all those who have offended him.

Also, in the “Petitions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help”, references were also made regarding human dignity, the need to pray for others’ needs, loving concern for others and service in the community. According to priests I interviewed, there was some fear among them that the revised text might not “click” with devotees because of their attachment to the older prayers. But these fears proved to be unfounded because on the first day the revised text was used (the Feast of the Perpetual Help in 1973), an estimated 100,000 copies of the novena booklet with the new prayers were immediately sold (The CSsR in the Philippines, 2006).

Judging by these events, the “Baclaran phenomenon” is largely a product of careful assessment of emerging needs in changing circumstances. What is phenomenal here is the dynamism of the devotion, which showcases creativity and responsiveness to new conditions. Because of the careful crafting of prayer texts and religious acts, the devotion has continued to provide a platform for expressing a broad spectrum of needs. This is apparent in the

expansion of the prayers to emphasize the social dimension of the requests – one does not pray only for oneself, but includes concerns beyond the devotee’s immediate sphere of influence.

Prayer as a social mirror: the aspirational character of ‘blessing’ and ‘grace’

As everyone already knows, the Perpetual Help devotion is a type of Catholic devotion centered on the Virgin Mary. This main feature of the devotion is the novena prayers, acts of piety like going to confession and receiving Communion, and, most importantly, the letters of petition and thanksgiving that devotees write. What is interesting from the social scientific point of view is how religious practices like novena prayers influence other spheres of the devotee’s life, or how these become indicators of persistent social realities. It is in how the devotees perform their religious obligations and how they make sense of these obligations in the context of their lives that make the Perpetual Help devotion a relevant social fact in the Philippine religious landscape today.

In the social scientific study of religion, the act of praying is itself an interesting object of inquiry. Prayer, like any human activity, consists of two interrelated dimensions. The first is institutional, which refers to dimensions that are patterned, habitual and external to the individual. In the Perpetual Help devotion this refers to prayer texts recited during the novena, as well as all acts of piety prescribed by the novena like standing or kneeling, singing songs, and attending Mass or Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. This would also refer to acts of piety that are done habitually by devotees even if these are outside the prescriptions of the novena, like lighting candles, walking on one’s knees, and praying before images of saints. The second is personal, which refers to dimensions that arise from religious sentiment and thus internal to the individual. One rich source of the personal dimension of prayer in the

case of the Perpetual Help devotion is the letters of petition and thanksgiving. These letters are hallmarks of individual subjectivity and expressiveness.

Although these dimensions are distinguishable, they are intertwined in everyday religious practice and are thus difficult to separate. Moreover, the institutional and personal dimensions of prayer tend to converge around several themes and thus reinforce each other. One example of this convergence of institutional and personal dimensions is in the orientation toward prosperity and blessings. Letters from devotees across the decades always mention blessings. One devotee, thanking the Virgin Mary for financial favors he received, said in his letter:

Sana lahat ng dumadalangin sa iyo ay pagpalain mo, na handang dumamay at anumang oras mo biyayaan at pagkalooban. Patnubayan mo ako dahil nasa gitna na ako ng aking pangarap na sana matupad balang-araw ang aking dinarasal sa iyo.

(I pray that you will bless all those who pray to you, and be ready at all times to bless them and hear their prayer. Guide me because I am about to fulfill the dream that I have always prayed to you about.)

(Letter dated April 30, 1996, from a male devotee)

Another devotee, thanking the Virgin Mary for healing, said in her letter:

Sa maniwala po kayo o sa hindi, ako po ay magaling na ngayon at smooth na rin ang pagsasama namin ng partner ko. Kaya sa lahat po ng nananalangin at naniniwala sa Ina ng Laging Saklolo, umasa tayo at talagang may biyaya tayong makakamit.

(Believe it or not, I am already healed now, and my relationship with my partner is smooth-sailing. To all those who pray and believe in Our Mother of Perpetual Help, let us have faith that we will really receive blessings.)

(Letter dated May 11, 2005, from a female devotee)

Besides testimonials by devotees, the aspiration for blessings is also an important dimension of the novena since its earliest days. The year 1948 when the Perpetual Novena started, in this regard, is also important: at this time, Manila and the rest of the Philippines was still recovering from the destruction of the Second World War. This could be one of the reasons why the novena became so popular among devotees – prayers that were attuned to

“temporal needs” like deliverance from affliction, sickness and war struck a deep chord among devotees. This attention to the needs of everyday life is also found in the 1973 revised text.

In this regard the Perpetual Help devotion displays typical characteristics of religious piety found throughout Southeast Asia, which is oriented to a better future, and hinges on notions of prosperity and abundance (Mulder 2000). Devotees in Baclaran Church have constantly emphasized this theme, and have referred to “*nabiyayaan*” (being blessed) and “*grasya*” (grace or favor) in their letters of petition and thanksgiving, as example above have shown. These statements, which are quite common, attest that notions of “blessing” play an important and defining role in the Perpetual Help devotion. These ideas of prosperity and the “good life” resonate so strongly in the devotees’ letters of petition and thanksgiving that I am convinced these are among the most important, if not *the* most important dimension of the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

The emphasis on blessings is important for sociological analysis because it is ultimately tied to aspirations. Aspirations are hinged on the devotee’s perceived status in society, and their ideas about how to reach the “good life”. This is the reason why devotees coming to Baclaran Church would already have an assessment of their own needs, which are largely defined by their position within a constellation of social relationships with family, loved ones, and even abstract realities like the nation or “the common good”. This assessment of needs is subjective, but in terms of general tendencies, devotees have always veered toward notions of “*sapat lang*” (fair/just enough to get by). As a general observation, devotees would always ask the Virgin Mary to spare them from experiences of *kapos* or *salat* (having too little in life) because it is not taken as a sign of divine favor. In a similar way, devotees would also shy away from having too much, because this is a sign of over-

attachment to material things. Positioned in the middle, aspirations of devotees are founded on what they perceive as reasonable.

What should be noted, however, is that *biyaya* or *grasya* so common among devotees do not only pertain to purely personal objects of request and thanksgiving, but more so relational and social ones as well. I have argued elsewhere that religious devotions like the Perpetual Help devotion are tied to notions of *pakikipagkapwa* (relating closely with others as extensions of oneself) and is a platform to assess notions of self-dependence and individual agency (Sapitula 2013a). Prayers and other devotional acts recommended by the novena devotion, in this sense, serve as a platform for aligning devotees' individual aspirations with their relationships with others. More so, their devotional acts affirm their bonds with people they hold dear in their life. This is the reason why devotees would always see the need to fulfill their perceived obligations, both to the divine figure and to other people entrusted to their care. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979) explains that roles do not only show a person's social position but also provides a "script" about how one ought to act. In this regard, devotees entering into a prayerful relationship with Our Mother of Perpetual Help is to enter into a specific role – that of a devotee. Seeking blessings (*nabiyayaan*) is part of this relationship, which is sought not for individual needs alone. On the contrary, blessings are sought because it is the resource at their disposal in order to maintain their rightful place in the constellation of their personal relationships. Blessings, no matter how material or "temporal" they are, actually enable strong and enduring social ties. This is the reason why seeking *biyaya* and *grasya* by devotees is such an important feature of the Perpetual Help Devotion.

The logic of "paying it forward"

In a letter dated January 20, 1953, a devotee who passed the Bar Exams expressed his thanks to the Virgin Mary with these words:

Last January 7 at 12:30 p.m., I found my name as one of the successful Bar candidates of 1953. We were and are all very happy. I am now a lawyer and will soon practice my profession, if God permits it. We, however, do not cease to recite our Daily Prayers. I will try my best to have an appointment to pray before your image, and every Wednesday at Baclaran, as long as I reside here in Manila or in the suburbs. I will try my very best to perform my duties as a lawyer religiously. Please help me, my mother, please give me courage and strength. My Mother of Perpetual Help, I thank you very much.

Fast forward to March 2010, an open letter from the Rector of the shrine in a tarpaulin was unfurled outside Baclaran Church. In the open letter he explained that the Perpetual Help devotion does not only involve one's personal needs, but also (and more importantly) reaching out to help others. The Rector encouraged devotees to aspire toward helping those who are in need because this guarantees that the novena they pray during Wednesdays does not become self-centered. Besides this tarpaulin announcement, the theme of devotees being "perpetual helps" for others also became a regular feature in The ICON Magazine, the shrine's official magazine.

In the mind of the Redemptorists, the Perpetual Help devotion should not be limited to requests for one's own needs, but is also an occasion to promote "integral evangelization", that is, the integration of one's faith commitments in everyday life. In this task, the role of lay people has increasingly been recognized, a theme that they have been discussing extensively since the late 1960's. During this time, the Redemptorists began a process of rethinking the emphasis on "Salvation, Sin, Hell, Confession, Prayer, Mass and the Blessed Virgin" in their mission work (Maguire 2005: 42). There was a view that these themes over-emphasized spiritual matters at the expense of compelling and important realities in everyday life (The C.Ss.R. in the Philippines, 2006). In redefining the role of faith in everyday life, Redemptorists in Baclaran Church have partnered with lay volunteers in order to expand the reach of social formation and development programs. As partners in mission, lay volunteers are distinguished by their efforts to closely link institutional expectations with their devotional identity.

Beyond lay volunteers, however, there is the mass of devotees who regularly come to Baclaran Church to attend the novena during Wednesdays. They make up 99 percent of all devotees. How does their devotion to the Virgin Mary become a part of their identity? This is an important question because the ultimate aim of Redemptorist mission work is the wider diffusion of “integral evangelization” among devotees who are not lay volunteers. Because they are too numerous, the priests resort to usual means of communication in the shrine to reach them. One example is preaching during the Mass and novena sessions. In a homily given a by a priest during the feast day of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in 2009, he said:

What is the meaning of true devotion for us today? It is simple: devotion to Our Blessed Mother does not only occur during Wednesdays but on each day that we find someone in need. It does not stop in church but continues on to where we are needed.

Alongside such statements, there are also attempts to articulate a “mission-oriented and socially-conscious” devotion in the use of the term *debo(mi)syon*. The word *debo(mi)syon* is a Tagalog neologism that combines devotion (*debosyon*) and mission (*misyon*). This is taken as an ideal combination of attention to one’s needs and the impulse to help those in need. In one issue of the ICON magazine, it was explained that “[m]ost importantly, our being devotee-missionary means that we ourselves become the *shrines* in our everyday life”. This is interesting because the notion of “shrine” is *embodied*; it does not only refer to the physical building, but also, and more importantly, the very person of the devotee. This embodiment of the shrine metaphor hinges institutional expectations to the devotee’s sense of self.

On the part of devotees, the notion of “giving back” is an important dimension of their devotional life. Even if it has been said more than once that devotees are only concerned with themselves, data from the letters and my interviews with devotees strongly suggests otherwise. This is largely because it is clear to devotees that they enter into a conscious and intentional relationship with the Virgin Mary by praying the novena. Thus, while notions of need and neediness that may prompt a devotee to start the devotion, it is a deep sense of trust

and obligation from one's *loob* (inner self) that sustains it (Sapitula 2013b). The ritual aspects of the novena are also stepping stones, and not the ultimate goal of the devotional relationship. In fact, for the devotional relationship with the Virgin Mary to go deeper, the devotee has to transcend (not abandon) ritual and sustain the relationship using resources flowing from one's *loob* (inner self). Thus, going back to the devotee who promised to "pay it forward" in 1953, such an expression is not an isolated case; in fact, in some form it is the typical tone of thanksgiving letters across decades.

Concluding Remarks

In the course of this paper, I have demonstrated compelling reasons as to why the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help has achieved popularity among Filipinos, and why it has remained relevant despite significant transitions in the course of decades. The first reason why the devotion has remained relevant is because of careful assessment of emerging needs and responsiveness to them. The second reason that contributed to its widespread appeal is that it was successful in acting as a *social mirror*, which allowed devotees to make sense of their everyday life. In this sense, the essence of a relevant devotional life does not lie in its aloofness to the realities of everyday life, but in its sustained attention to them. The Perpetual Help devotion has allowed devotees to craft the life they desire to live, and after this to map out the resources they need and the obstacles they will encounter along the way.

Related to this is the third reason for the continuing relevance of the Perpetual Help devotion: it allows devotees to reaffirm their bonds with others in a meaningful way. This is the strongest proof of the *interpersonal* and *social* nature of the devotion. In this regard, I would say that criticisms hinting that devotional acts makes people self-absorbed is not supported by data. What actually happens is that devotional acts allow devotees to focus on

their own life without making them self-centered. Why is this the case? Because the “life” that is the subject of introspection in devotional practice is founded on relationships with others, with their corresponding expectations, obligations and rewards. In the case of Perpetual Help devotees, their devotional practice allows them to reaffirm the bonds they have with people in their life. Thus, devotional acts are neither a flight from the real world nor a retreat to selfishness. The fuel that keeps the fire of devotional practice burning is the social nature of the self.

Having said these, my next point is to affirm the point that making the Perpetual Help devotion continually relevant is such a precarious and difficult task. There is no guaranteed formula to this success, and attempts elsewhere have not always been as effective or desirable. Thus, from a sociological point of view, there is nothing inherent about the success of the Perpetual Help devotion in the Philippines. It is creativity, responsiveness, and of course, hard work that sustain this continuing relevance and popularity. It is the careful treading between tradition and innovation, which is founded on the continuous monitoring of the “signs of the times”, that guarantees that emerging needs will find its way into the prayers and other acts of piety. What is necessary, therefore, is not a distinct “formula for success”, but a mechanism that acts as an antidote to creeping complacency and lethargy. We can envision more changes with how the Perpetual Help devotion will be done as it ages with time. As long as changes are justified and the product of careful assessment and discernment, more people will find the Perpetual Help devotion a resource in aspiring for their own piece of *magandang buhay* (the good life).

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