

# **Devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help in the Philippines: Phenomenological and Theological Reflection**

Fr. Amado L. Picardal, CSsR

## **Part I. Phenomenological Perspective**

How widespread and popular is the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help in the Philippines? For me, there is no need to conduct a formal or scientific survey. My personal observation backed up by other studies would suffice. As a member of the Redemptorist Mission Team I have been to many parishes all over Visayas and Mindanao giving missions and helping form Basic Ecclesial Communities. I have also biked around Mindanao in 2006 and around the country in 2008 staying in various parishes for the night. In 2010, I ran and walked across the Philippines preaching the Gospel of life and peace in various parish churches. As part of my work with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines I've also been giving talks, conducted seminars and clergy retreats in many dioceses all over the Philippines. Wherever I go I always ask if they hold the perpetual novena to our Mother of Perpetual Help. The answer has always been a YES. And I have seen this for myself. Even very popular shrines such as Our Lady Manaoag, the Quiapo Church of the Nazareno, and the Sto Nino in Cebu have perpetual novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) communities in various parts of the world hold perpetual novena. Seminaries all over the country also hold perpetual novena. There are fifty-four parishes in the Philippines dedicated to the Mother of Perpetual Help. We often see a lot of pictures of the Mother of Perpetual Help in public transportation (in buses, jeepneys, taxicabs, tricycles), in homes and business establishments. As a political prisoner during Martial Law, I saw the image of the Mother of Perpetual Help tattooed in a prisoner's back (someone jokingly asked him to take off his shirt so that the prisoners can hold a novena). The Mother of Perpetual Help has indeed become the most popular image and devotion of the Blessed Virgin Mary in

the country. It is ubiquitous. Thus, it can be said that the Mother of Perpetual Help is widely known and venerated all over the country.

The Mother of Perpetual Help has become part of popular religiosity. It has also become part of the liturgical life of the Philippine Church. In 1975, the CBCP in its Pastoral Letter “Ang Mahal na Birhen” acknowledged the popularity of the weekly novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help - referring to it as a paraliturgical celebration in her honor. <sup>1</sup>

### ***Devotion to MPH as Part of Popular Religiosity***

Popular religiosity or folk religiosity is associated with the religious practices and beliefs of the common people. It is spontaneous and not necessarily sanctioned or controlled by the institutional Church although the symbols and images may be introduced by missionaries and the local clergy. It becomes popular as it spreads among the people due to its mass appeal. The CBCP Pastoral Letter on Marian devotion describes popular religiosity:

This popular religiosity is manifested above all in a special sense of God and of His providence over our lives, of the special help and protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints and in certain fundamental attitudes in the face of life and death. From these arise the popular devotions, novenas, processions, pilgrimages, fiestas, and the celebrations that surround baptism, first communion, marriage, death and burial.<sup>2</sup>

Their popularity may be attributed to the meaningfulness of the religious practice or image. It could also be due to their miraculous character. Popular religiosity is often associated with a people’s culture - especially with the underlying values and world view of the people. The popular religious images and practices during the Spanish period was associated with the infant Jesus (Sto. Nino) and the suffering Jesus ( Nazareno, Santo

---

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines “Ang Mahal na Birhen: Mary in Philippine Life Today: Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary” 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid..

Intierro). This was also associated with the patron saints. The special moments - Christmas, Holy Week, patronal fiestas.

The rapid spread of Christianity can be explained to the successful efforts to the Spanish missionaries to replace the local native religious practices with Christian symbols:

“the veneration of images of Christ, Mary and the saints tended to replace the pre-conquest practice of worshipping *larawans* (animist images). This predisposition toward iconic representations of divine power enabled the local population to identify with Christian images as replacements for their pre-conquest divinities, as these were absorbed into their existing indigenous sacral iconography (Mojares 2002). This “insertion” of Christian iconography within existing templates of local religion is more apparent in accounts of “discoveries” of religious images. The *Santo Niño* (Holy Child), for instance, was “discovered” in 1565 by the crew of Legazpi’s fleet, as they obtained knowledge that that the locals continued worshipping the image even after Magellan’s departure (Mojares 2002; Bautista 2010). There are similar “discovery stories” for Marian images: a member of Legazpi’s fleet, for instance, discovered the image of the *Nuestra Señora de Guia* (Our Lady of Guidance) being worshipped by the Tagalogs near Manila as a *diwata*. The image of the *Nuestra Señora de Caysasay* (Our Lady of Caysasay, named after the town where it was found) is reported to have been fished out of Pansipit River in Batangas province in 1603, while the image of the *Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria* (Our Lady of Candles) was reportedly fished out of Iloilo River in 1587 (Barcelona and Estepa 2004).”<sup>3</sup>

The Marian devotion was often localized and associated with images in pilgrim sites such as Our Lady of Penafrancia in Naga, Virgen de la Paz y Buen Viaje in Antipolo, Our Lady of Piat in Tuguegarao, Our Lady of Badoc in Ilocos, Birhen de la Regla in Cebu, Our Lady of the Pillar in Zamboanga, etc. This was part of the missionary strategy:

This naming of churches in honor of Mary was supplemented by the encouragement of the cult of sacred images, which was another missionary strategy that greatly aided

---

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Victor Sapitula *Marian Piety and Modernity: Sociological Assessment of Popular Religion in the Philippines* (Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy department of Sociology, National University of Singapore 2013), 103-104.

Catholic mission work. The friars utilized Marian images to lure locals away from their worship of local divinities, commissioning local craftsmen to carve images to be sent to their mission stations. In one account, Fr. Diego Aduarte, O.P. narrates how an image of the *Nuestra Señora del Santísimo Rosario* in their convent church in Manila had earned a high reputation among city residents (cited in Blair and Robertson 1903). The image of the *Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia* (Our Lady of Peñafrancia) was brought to Bicol in 1712 and housed in a chapel, from which its fame spread throughout the Bicol provinces (Barcelona and Estepa 2004). In the absence of local craftsmen, the missionaries requested shipments of images from Mexico despite the prohibitive cost of renting a space in galleons plying the Manila-Acapulco route. The oldest Marian images in Luzon from Mexico includes the *Nuestra Señora del Santísimo Rosario* of Orani in Bataan in 1581 and of Manaoag in Pangasinan in 1608; the *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso* (Our Lady of Good Happenings) in Parañaque in 1610; and the *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje* (Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage) in Antipolo in 1632 (Santos 1983).<sup>4</sup>

The devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help can be considered as the latest addition to Catholic popular religion in the Philippines:

“The Perpetual Help Devotion is one of the latest additions in a long line of Catholic popular devotions that have become widespread in the Philippines and abroad (especially among overseas Filipinos). The devotion to the *Santo Niño* (Holy Child), the earliest form of Catholic popular religion in the country, is widespread outside its home base in Cebu province in central Philippines. The devotion to the reputed image of the Black Nazarene (venerated in Quiapo district in Manila) was started in 1606 by the Franciscans, while the devotion to *Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia*, the patroness of the Bicol region south of Manila, has been in existence since 1710. The Perpetual Help Devotion is one of the few forms of Catholic popular religion of recent origins

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to achieve such widespread success, thus making it an *exemplary case* of the liveliness of religious practice in the Philippines.”<sup>5</sup>

The Icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help was introduced by the Redemptorists in 1906 upon their arrival and the Perpetual Novena to our Mother of Perpetual Help started after World War II. So it is indeed a recent phenomenon - during the post-colonial era. It is amazing how in so short a time it has already spread throughout the archipelago and outside the Redemptorist shrine churches where they were started. It no longer belongs to the Redemptorists in the Philippines even if the centers of this devotion are the Redemptorist shrine churches in Baclaran, Lipa, Cebu and Iloilo. It has become part of the Filipino popular religious tradition, received and owned by the Church in Philippines. What is unique about the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help is it is not limited within the confines of a specific place and time - it is everywhere and throughout the Wednesdays of the year. It is indeed perpetual.

Of course, Baclaran is still the place to go on Wednesdays and other days and nights. It is the only church in Philippines that never closes. This is where politicians, movie stars and prostitutes come to pray even in unholy hours when everybody else is asleep. This is where OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) come to pray before flying to various parts of the world to pursue their dreams of a better life. The National Shrine has become part of popular religious culture. Movies have been made with scenes in Baclaran. There were a couple movies about stories of devotees to the Mother of Perpetual Help. Virginial Fabella describes the Baclaran phenomenon:

“In Baclaran just outside Manila, the Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the largest church in the Philippines, is filled to overflowing every Wednesday. Throughout the day, more than 100,000 devotees pray the perpetual novena in Our Mother’s honor. They fix their eyes on the icon above the main altar, also believed to be miraculous, as they recite the novena prayers, make their petitions and render thanks for favors granted. Before leaving they light a votive candle to make sure their pleas remain beneath Our Mother’s gaze. Whether in Quiapo or in Baclaran or in some other church or shrine, what these people manifest is their religiosity, or,

---

<sup>5</sup>Sapitula, .4

in the words of Filipino theologian Carlos Gaspar, the ‘subjective, simple, inculturated faith’ of the Filipino.” “PCP II acknowledged that, for most Filipinos, the faith is centred on the practice of popular piety with the line between the two tracks getting slowly blurred: educated professionals, bejewelled matrons and uneducated market vendors kneel side by side in Quiapo and Baclaran, and prelates officiate in popular devotions. Thus popular religion has an important role to play. If inculturation is a true exchange between the gospel and culture, then the process should begin at the very roots of the people’s religiosity that have been kept alive by popular religion.”<sup>6</sup>.

The popularity of the Perpetual Help devotion, not just in confined in Baclaran. It is all over the country:

From a historical perspective, the popularity of the Perpetual Help Devotion is striking not only in the Perpetual Help shrine in Baclaran but throughout the Philippines as well. No other Marian shrine in the country is able to draw crowds on a weekly basis in the same way that the Perpetual Help shrine does. Moreover, the devotion is already a regular feature of Catholic parishes in the country, where the novena is also recited every Wednesday. This serves as an indicator of the ways by which devotees and religious institutions in the Philippines craft the relevance of Marian piety in their everyday lives... the Perpetual Help Devotion is an important reference point through which assessments of popular religion in the Philippines may be made, as these practices are similarly found in Marian shrines all over the country.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Institutionalization of the devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help***

The devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help is not just part of popular religiosity. It has been adopted by the institutional Church of the Philippines. The official declaration of

---

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Inculturating the Gospel: The Philippine Experience” [online] available <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/39Fabella.pdf> p.118.

<sup>7</sup> Sapitula. 97

Redemptorist Church in Baclaran as National shrine of the Mother of Perpetual Help is part of this process of institutionalization. But more than that the Perpetual Novena was adopted by most if not all the churches in the Philippines. It was no longer just being celebrated in Redemptorist shrine Churches. The acceptance of the Perpetual Novena in parish churches all over the Philippines is indeed phenomenal and unique to the Philippines which has not happened anywhere else:

“While the association between the Perpetual Help Devotion and Wednesday is already institutionalized in the Philippines, it must be noted that there is nothing special about the choice of Wednesday (Hechanova 1998). A cursory look at novena schedules shows that the Perpetual Novena devotions were held in different days in other Redemptorist churches in the country. It was initially held every Monday in Iloilo and every Sunday in Cebu. Because of the success of the Perpetual Novena in Baclaran, however, these communities synchronized their novena sessions to achieve greater uniformity throughout the country. Catholic parishes in and around Manila likewise held novena sessions on Wednesdays. Two years after the inauguration of the Perpetual Novena in Baclaran, the prayers were already recited in parishes in Quezon City, Quiapo and Sampaloc in Manila, Taguig, and Marilao, Obando and Barasoain in Bulacan province (entry dated 1-7 April 1950; cited in Gornez 2003).<sup>8</sup>

While the Perpetual Novena was introduced immediately after the war, the promotion of the devotion started as early as 1906 when the Irish Redemptorist missionaries placed a copy of the image of the Mother of Perpetual Help in the parish church in Opon, Cebu which they brought from Ireland. This was just 40 years after Pius IX entrusted the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help to the Redemptorists in Rome. Since the early decades of the 20th century, the Redemptorists promoted the Mother of Perpetual Help in their parish missions all over the country. Staying in parish churches and barrio chapels for a week where they preached, celebrated the Eucharist and administered the sacraments of baptism, penance and matrimony, the Redemptorists would set up a special altar with the picture of the Mother of Perpetual Help. They also brought with them rosaries, medals and holy pictures – including that of the Mother of Perpetual Help.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 83.

“The missions would usually take place for several days to several weeks depending on the population of the place where it is to be conducted. The missionaries usually visited individual homes to invite the faithful to the village chapel or to the local church. While there, the faithful are taught Catechism, prayers and religious songs. The people were then made to receive various sacraments. Couples who had cohabited together without the benefit of a wedding were given the Sacrament of Matrimony. Children without baptism were baptized and the missionaries also heard people’s confessions. Part of the program followed by the missionaries was to introduce the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. The Redemptorists also explained the symbols of the picture, which, of course, served as a visual catechism.” Mansuet “As part of their catechetical program and also in order to have some money to support the missions, the Redemptorists brought with them and sold some devotional objects. These devotional items included books, novenas, scapulars, rosaries and pictures of Our Mother of Perpetual Help so this was one reason why the picture became very popular, even in households in far flung areas. Residents who had been mission-recipients eagerly bought pictures of Our Lady as mementoes of the mission. These pictures were also sought-after since these were of exquisite print, having been obtained abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, long before the Perpetual Novena was introduced in 1946, the picture of the Mother of Perpetual Help and devotion to her was already promoted by the Redemptorists. The introduction of Perpetual Novena in Redemptorist shrine churches and its subsequent adoption by parish churches hastened the spread and popularity of the devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help. The modern means of mass media communication helped a lot in spreading the MPH devotion and Perpetual Novena:

“The popularity of the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help further soared higher when the novena was broadcasted in radio and TV stations, not only in Baclaran but also in the case of Cebu, Lipa and Iloilo but also in other Redemptorist

---

<sup>9</sup> Dale Mansueto “Make Her known: How the devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help flourished in the Philippines” unpublished MS 2015, 7-8.

houses. That was what made the devotion a national phenomenon in the Philippines.”<sup>10</sup>

In some cases, the popularity of the Perpetual Novena preceded the establishment of some Redemptorist houses:

“Our Mother of Perpetual Help and her Perpetual Novena had become so popular so that when other Redemptorist houses were established such as those in Legazpi, Davao, Bacolod, Dumaguete, Iligan and Tacloban, the Wednesday devotion was already flourishing in the nearby parishes which were run by the secular clergy. Due to this, families and individuals even had devotions to the Mother of God. To some extent, certain families even had chapels built in her honor.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Redemptorists cannot claim all the credit for the spread of the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help and the novena since the Perpetual Novena also spread in parishes where the Redemptorists did not conduct missions. It seems that this came about from a movement from below (from the common people, the devotees) and from above (the promotion of the novena by the clergy). The devotees would ask their parish priests to introduce the Perpetual Novena in their parish churches - thus, it was by popular demand.

On the other hand the priests themselves were convinced that it would be a good idea to celebrate the perpetual novena especially in the middle of the week. Many of the priests were exposed to the devotion Mother of Perpetual Help even before entering the seminary. The image Mother of Perpetual Help was prominently displayed in the family altar or as young boys accompanied their parents in attending the Perpetual Novena in Baclaran or in other Redemptorist shrine churches. The Perpetual Novena has been celebrated in seminaries which promoted devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help among the future priests who one day would introduce the Perpetual Novena in parish churches where they were not yet adopted.

So now, the Perpetual Novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help has become part of the liturgical life of the Church which the CBCP refers to as paraliturgy. Most pious

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

Catholics go to Church regularly twice a week - on Sundays and Wednesdays. In some remote parishes where there are no daily masses the parish priest make sure that there is Sunday Mass and Wednesday Novena-Mass. For a time the Novena was integrated within the Mass but due to the objection of liturgists the novena took place before the mass or after mass. In some barrio chapels where Basic Ecclesial Communities are established, the members come together on Sundays for Bible-Service (led by lay liturgical leaders) and on Wednesdays for the Perpetual Novena. In the Philippine context, the Perpetual Novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help may be regarded as a concrete expression of the Church as a priestly people - a worshipping community.

The MPH has spread throughout the country for the following reasons:

1. The form of Christianity that has taken root in the Philippines over the last 500 years is Marian in character. This is part of popular religiosity.
2. The Marian piety during the Spanish era was localized in town/churches (associated to a particular place) with a statue and fiestas. It was linked to a sacred space (the shrine/pilgrim Church) and sacred time (fiesta). The Mother of Perpetual Help is the latest manifestation of Marian devotion (the image and devotion in 1906, the Perpetual Novena in 1946) – but unlike the traditional devotion it was more than localized – even if there are still popular shrines of the Mother of Perpetual Help (Baclaran, Cebu, Iloilo, Lipa). It was like a virus that spread through all the churches.
3. The Redemptorists were responsible for promoting it earlier but the local diocesan clergy and devotees also adopted and popularized it. Thus, it has been adopted by the local Church – by every diocese and parish and the whole Church in the Philippines
4. The radio and TV broadcast helped in propagating it.
5. Ultimately, it is the meaningfulness and relevance of the image of Mother of Perpetual Help to Filipino Catholics that may account for its spread.

## **Part II. Theological Reflection**

After showing how popular the devotion Mother of Perpetual Help and the Perpetual Novena is, the question that concerns us is - why is this so? What is in the icon Mother of

Perpetual Help and Perpetual Novena that appeals to so many people? How do they see the picture? How does it affect them? Why do people - the devotees- keep coming back to the Mother of Perpetual Help shrine-churches or gather in any church for the Perpetual Novena?

We begin with discerning the meaning of the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help. In talking about meaning we make a distinction between the original meaning intended by the artist and the iconic tradition to which he belonged. This is the meaning inherent in the image. It is said that the artist is a theologian and the icon is meant to disclose divine truths. But like any work of art or religious images and texts - an icon takes a life of its own with meaning and significance that is disclosed or ascribed beyond what the artist or iconographer intended. One must also take into consideration it means to people who are drawn to the icon, who venerate it and become devotees. Then finally, there is the meaning prescribed by the Church authority - the clergy, religious and theologians - who regulate and judge the veracity and legitimacy of the various interpretations. This is to guarantee the orthodoxy of such interpretations.

Discerning the meaning of religious icon is akin to interpreting the scriptural texts, dogmatic texts and other images. They are referred to as classics by philosophers like Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur and theologians like David Tracy.<sup>12</sup> For David Tracy a religious classic in Christianity can be applied not only to the sacred scripture, magisterial texts and images but also to persons (Christ) and events. A classic by nature will continue to be meaningful and relevant at all times and in all places. A classic also is polysemic - it does not have one single meaning but yields to various levels of meaning and interpretation. It has a surplus of meaning. This is a postmodern perspective.

Theology is, therefore, hermeneutical. The task of the systematic theologian is to interpret and re-interpret the religious classic taking into consideration the contemporary human situation and experience which influence such interpretation. This will require correlation and fusion of horizon - between what the classic meant and what it means today. So let us now apply this to the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help which can be considered as a religious classic.

---

<sup>12</sup> cf. David Tracy *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

Let us begin with the meaning of the icon as intended by the artist.<sup>13</sup> An icon is a sacred image that originated in Crete which was part of the Eastern Roman Empire which was later called the Byzantine Empire. It is an expression of the sacred Byzantine art. Icon is actually synonymous with image. An icon is more than a picture. It conveys the presence of the sacred that it signifies. It is regarded as sacramental. When a person contemplates an icon, he or she comes into contact with the sacred that the icon represents. The icon is also theological - it discloses the divine truth or the nature of who it depicts. It is theology in images rather than in words. The artists or iconographers must be faithful to the theology and liturgy of the Church to which he belongs. The subject of the icons are among others Christ (e.g. Pantokrator), the Trinity ( Rublev's), Mary, the saints. Most of the Marian icons depict Mary with the child Jesus. Among them are the Theotokos, the praying Virgin, the guiding Virgin (hodegetria), the Virgin of the Passion. The Virgin of the passion shows Mary with the child Jesus and two angels carrying the instruments of the passion. The icon of the Mother of Perpetual is classified as the Theotokos of the Passion - referred to as Stratsnia in Russia.

The icon shows Mary the Mother of God giving comfort and assurance to her son. It also suggests her own anticipation of suffering in union with Jesus (a sword shall pierce her heart). Her compassionate gaze at the beholder is an invitation to come to her for comfort and to be in communion with her son's suffering that brings redemption and salvation.

What is the meaning of the icon to the ordinary faithful and devotees? The Theotokos of the Passion was experienced as the Mother who answered their prayers. In times of need they came to her and they received the graces and favors they asked for. Thus, she was popularly known as the Mother of Perpetual Help. When her image was brought from Crete to Rome in the 15th century the icon developed the reputation of being miraculous. She was officially declared as the Mother of Perpetual Help by Pius IX. To this day, the Theotokos of the Passion is known as the Mother of Perpetual Help. This is who she is to millions of her devotees - a merciful, loving Mother ever ready to help them in all their needs. This accounts for her popularity and mass appeal. Those who come to the novena every Wednesday bring

---

<sup>13</sup> In the discussion of the nature of Icon in general and the Icon of the MPH, I am indebted to the following : Megan McKenna, *Mary: Shadows of Grace* (St Paul's: Makati, 1997), 147-161. Adelino Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: History and Interpretation of the Icon* (Redemptorist Novena Community: Singapore, nd). Daniel B. Buckley, *The Miraculous Picture of the Mother of Perpetual Succour* (Mercier Press: Cork, 1948).

with them their petitions - healing, passing the board exams, getting a good job, employment abroad, finding a husband, etc. Others pray for the needs of their families, friends and for their country. They also come to give thanks for favors and graces received.

In the mind of some devotees, she is divine - the source of all grace and blessings. They pray to her and she answers their prayers. She is the feminine face of the divine. In a religion where the masculine image of God dominates this is an appealing image. However, this can lead to the heresy of mariolatry.

To others she is not really the source of all graces but the channel of grace and blessings. Through her intercession God's grace and blessings are poured out on the faithful. In a society where the father is experienced by many as a distant, absent or unapproachable figure, it becomes easier to approach Mother Mary than God the Father or Christ the Lord and King. Thus, the role of Mary as intermediary becomes more meaningful.

What does the icon of Mother of Perpetual Help mean to those associated with the institutional Church - the clergy, religious and theologians? What does it mean for the Redemptorists who have been given the task by Pope Pius IX to make her known throughout the world? These are the people who promote and regulate the devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help. Through their preaching and writings they set the tone of how the icon should be interpreted and which interpretation that emerge among the lay faithful are appropriate, valid and in line with deposit of faith and the teachings of the Church. Their interpretation of the icon can become the content of evangelization and catechesis regarding the devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help.

Since Vatican II, the Church in the Philippines have tried to promote a Marian piety in general that is more biblically-based and that asserts the social dimension of the Marian devotion and avoiding abuses such as ritualism and mariolatry (cf Ang Mahal na Birhen). The Redemptorists in the Philippines have made substantial revision of the Novena that stresses the social and missionary dimension of the devotion. Besides praying for one's personal needs the devotees are urged to pray for the needs of the community and society. This includes praying for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. The emphasis of *debo-misyon* by the Mother of Perpetual Help shrine in Baclaran is promoting a sense of mission among the devotees - to actively participate in the church's evangelizing mission, to care for the poor and care for the earth, to be of service to others. Thus, this orientation is not only

reflected in the homilies but in the various social services programs that cater to the needs of the people who come to the shrine. Sapitula shares his analysis on changing content and social orientation of the Perpetual Novena:

“This links the Perpetual Help icon and the congregation’s institutional identity and missionary *praxis* of the Redemptorists: in claiming custodianship of the Perpetual Help icon, the Redemptorists have ushered its transformation into a devotional object of global proportions and that consolidated their own “spiritual capital” within Catholicism itself. In the local scene, the discussion of the historical development of the Perpetual Help prayer texts; the evolution of the shrine compound; and the shifts in crafting a form of “engaged devotionism” all demonstrate the successful adaptation of the Perpetual Help Devotion to the exigencies of religious, social and political life in the Philippines. In this matter, the Perpetual Help Devotion stands apart from documented cases of the decline of Catholic popular piety or church-oriented religious practice because of their inability to adapt to broad-level changes in institutional and social arrangements (e.g. Ahern 1987; Bax 1985; Kelly and Kelly 1998; Sharp 1999). In the case of the Perpetual Help Devotion, the Redemptorists were able to expand the reach of the devotion’s significance in ways that resonated with structural changes in postwar Philippine society. The Perpetual Novena has thus retained its “public devotion centered on private ends” motif, although the price of its maintenance entail constant watchfulness as social realities and motives continually shift and create new reasons for further adaptation.”

A closer reading of the 1973 Perpetual Novena reveals that social justice and peace dimensions are given more attention, perhaps as a corrective to the perceived overemphasis on personal needs in the 1948 Perpetual Novena text (Gornez 2003; Hechanova 1998). Documents from the Redemptorist archives and external theological assessments of the revised novena text report that the inclusion of the communitarian and social justice dimensions was explicitly intended by the Joint Committee. One finds in the novena prayers references to the need to be aware of broader social concerns. 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.” In the litany of “Petitions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help”, explicit references are made regarding the dignity of the human being, the need to pray for others’ needs as well as one’s own, loving concern for others and openness to service in the community.<sup>14</sup>

In spite the best efforts of Redemptorists to inject a more relevant and social orientation to the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help, it appears that the meaning of the icon of MPH as the Mother who answers all their needs and showers them with blessings and graces continue to dominate the minds and hearts of the ordinary faithful and devotees. Whether we like it or not popular religiosity in general and popular devotion to Mother of Perpetual Help in particular has a life of its own. What appeals to the vast majority is the miraculous character of the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help who answers their prayers and supplications. She is the mother ever ready to help us. This has led some experts like Fr Rene Javellana, SJ to comment on the contradiction between what the icon originally meant in the Byzantine-Orthodox iconography (participation in the passion-suffering of our Lady and her son) and what it means to millions of devotees (source or channel of perpetual help and material blessings). His comment is worth quoting in full:

“Madonnas that are subject to profound devotion are accompanied by their own novenas, which are commentaries on the icon itself. One popular mother icon is Baclaran’s Mother of Perpetual Help. It is easily the most popular Marian image in Metro Manila, and draws ten thousand devotees for each of its novena Masses... Interpreted within its own visual traditions, the icon may be called Our Lady of the Passion. The total picture shows the Child Jesus in Mary’s arms. The child does not turn toward the mother as in other Byzantina Madonnas but has his eyes transfixed on the angels identified as Michael and Gabriel, who carry aloft the symbol of the passion. A sandal of the child is undone as he contemplates the frightening prospects

---

<sup>14</sup> Sapitula, 84.

of his life. But then the child clings tenaciously to his mother, and finds safety there.” “Mother of Christ”, the final hymn of the novena, extols the desire of the devotees not “for the wealth of earth, for the joy that fades and flees,” but for the “treasure upon thy knee.” A study made of devotees to Baclaran has demonstrated that, in fact, many do pray for wealth, success in business and studies, success in their love life, and solution to family problems, among others. A cynic might remark that the final hymn is all rhetoric! But my own reflections on the devotion do not center on that, but rather the opportunity missed by the priests who revised the novena after Vatican II when they did not take heed of the iconographical content of the image itself. Nothing in the final hymn nor in the novena itself hints the treasure upon Mary’s knee is Jesus facing the passion. When related to the icon, the hymn speaks of a paradox: the treasure to be inherited is the treasure of pain and suffering.

But the imagery of the final hymn itself blurs the motif of suffering: the image, rather, is that of possessing Jesus as a treasure after a long, hazardous journey through life. And it is not just the final hymn that underplays suffering as a value. Avoiding suffering through the help of the mother is, in fact, another theme that runs through the whole novena itself. True, the revised novena has placed intercession within a wider context. True, the novena challenges the devotee to pray for far-reaching things like peace, social justice, and more vocations to the ministry, but there are also traditional prayers for the sick, the home, and ubiquitous prayer where one fills in the blanks for petition sought for in the novena. True, the novena immediately adds, “If what I ask is not for the glory of God or for the good of my soul, do thou obtain for me what is conducive for both.” But then, it again assumes that asking and begging is the right and proper stance before the Mother. Under-girding the devotee’s relationship to the Mother is the supposition that life is a valley of tears, a “tempestuous sea,” and like the Christ Child, the devotee must cling to Mary’s hand. Christ clinging to Mary seems to be the iconographic detail around which the literary commentary centers.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Rene B. Javellana, SJ “Ntra. Sra. De La \_\_\_ To Mama Mary”. *Reading in Popular Culture*. Ed. Soledad Reyes, ORP Ateneo de Manila: Quezon City, 2002), 162-163.

There are some iconologists and theologians who prefer to stick to the original meaning of the icon and dismiss other interpretations not in line with this. But in a postmodern age, such positivism is unacceptable. The icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help, when considered as a religious classic is rich with meaning. It possesses a “surplus of meaning” - to borrow a term from Paul Ricoeur. There is no such thing as one valid meaning, one exclusively valid interpretation for all times and all places. Every interpretation must be considered and their validity and appropriateness assessed. This is the task of the theologian and this is the role of the Church magisterium.

In this final section I would like to focus on two titles of Mary that are being linked to the icon of MPH: Mary as Co-redemptrix and Mediatrix. This is timely since there have been efforts in the Philippines and elsewhere to popularize these titles.

*Mother of Perpetual Help: Our Lady of the Passion and the Coredemptrix*

Contemplation on the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help should lead us to venerate Mary as the Mother of God who is at the same time the Virgin of the Passion – the Theotokos of the Passion. The focus of contemplation is not just Mary but the child Jesus looking at the angels Michael and Gabriel carrying the instruments of the passion and grasping his mother’s hand. The child Jesus, the God who is with us, is destined to be the Redeemer – the Messiah - of the world who will fulfill his mission through his passion on the cross, through his suffering, death and resurrection. He is destined to be the suffering servant, the suffering Messiah. Mary is to be the mother of the suffering servant who will share in the passion – in the suffering of her son.<sup>16</sup> This is what compassion is – *cum passio* – to suffer with. The dread and sorrow of her son who jumps to her arms upon seeing the angels bearing the instruments of his passion is also her dread and sorrow – recalling the words of Simon during the presentation of the child in the temple “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, to be a sign that will be contradicted and a sword will pierce through your own heart, too ...” (Lk 3:34-35). This text may be interpreted as an annunciation of Mary’s future role of sharing in her son’s passion:

---

<sup>16</sup>Mark Miravalle, *Mary: Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate* (Queenship Publishing: Santa Barbara, Ca, 1993), 3.

“This sorrowful annunciation to the Mother of the Savior confirms that her intimate sharing in the redemptive work of her Son will be at the price of profound suffering, and will lead her in the obedience of faith to the side of the suffering Redeemer.”<sup>17</sup>

By virtue of Mary’s union with her son in his suffering that brought about redemption Mary is worthy of being regarded as Co-redemptrix. This is how Pope Pius XI addressed Mary:

“O Mother of love and mercy who when thy sweetest Son was consummating the Redemption of the human race on the altar of the cross, did stand next to Him, suffering with Him as Coredemptrix ... preserve in us, we beseech thee, and increase day by day the precious fruit of His redemption and the compassion of His Mother.”<sup>18</sup>

St. John Paul II affirmed Mary’s sharing in Jesus’ redemptive suffering:

“In her [Mary], the many and intense sufferings were amassed in such an interconnected way that they were not only a proof of her unshakeable faith, but also a contribution to the Redemption of all... It was in Calvary that Mary’s suffering, besides the suffering of Jesus reached such an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view, but which mysteriously and supernaturally fruitful for the Redemption of the world. Her ascent to Calvary and her standing at the foot of the cross together with the beloved disciple were a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son” *Salvifici Doloris* n. 25

Mary’s gaze directed at the beholder of the icon and her hand that points to the child is an invitation to the devotee to be part of this drama of redemption. The hand of Mary that point to the child Jesus suggests a variation of the “odigitria” or “hodegetria” – the guiding virgin that points to her son as the way to be followed. Apparently, she is saying to the devotees – follow the way of my son, the way of the cross, embrace suffering, carry your cross that will lead to redemption, suffer with him like I did. Thus, by uniting themselves with the suffering of the Messiah as they carry out the mission entrusted to them in baptism –

---

<sup>17</sup> Miravalle, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Pius XI, Prayer of the Solemn Closing of the Redemption Jubilee, April 28, 1935. Quoted in Miravalle, 17.

the prophetic, priestly, servant mission - they, too, can become Co-redeemers. This means actively participating in Christ's mission and the readiness to sacrifice themselves – to embrace our cross -- to fulfill the redemptive and liberating mission.

This implies that devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help – the Virgin of the Passion and Co-redemptrix - means that the faithful actively participate in Christ's redeeming and liberating mission, and in the process willingly carry their cross, embrace suffering to the point of martyrdom if necessary in order to fulfill the mission. The faithful, like Mary shares in Christ's passion and redeeming mission and become co-redeemers:

The Marian model of Coredemptrix offers a particular richness to the People of God with regard to the Christian call and mission to become “co-workers” or co-redeemers in Christ (cf Cor 3:6)... Mary's life as Coredemptrix, in imitation of her Redeemer Son, is the dynamic personal statement and proof that in the Christian life suffering is redemptive.<sup>19</sup>

Another interpretation of Mary's penetrating and compassionate gaze is that she assures us that she is there for us, not necessarily to take away our suffering, but to suffer with us. She will not take away our cross, if the cross is necessary to fulfill our mission. This is what compassion is all about.

The interpretation that is to be avoided is the fatalistic acceptance of any suffering – caused by poverty, injustice, exploitation, the destruction of the environment – as God's will that we should patiently and passively bear and not do something about. Not every problem, difficulty or suffering should automatically be associated with the cross or redemptive suffering. We have to emphasize that suffering and the cross is always linked with mission. Suffering is associated with rejection, the inconvenience, the persecution, arrest, detention, even death, as a consequence of fulfilling our mission.

#### *Mother of Perpetual Help: Mediatrix of God's Grace*

The popularity of the Mother of Perpetual Help is based on the miraculous nature of the icon. Down through the centuries up to the present, so many people have experienced

---

<sup>19</sup> Miravalle, 74.

their prayers being answered. Thus, spontaneously, the faithful have often referred to the icon of the Virgin of the Passion as our Lady or Mother of Perpetual Help. There may have been people who regarded Mary as the source of all graces. This is unacceptable and could be condemned as heresy – mariolatry. She does not have a divine nature, she is not a feminine goddess. Only God and his only begotten-son Jesus Christ is the source of all graces. Mary is a channel of God’s grace and blessings. Thus, the title of Mediatrix of God’s grace has been applied to her.

In using this title one should bear in mind that there is only one mediator between God and Man (human beings) – it is our Lord Jesus Christ – true God and true man. As St. Paul proclaims: “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6).

However, this does not exclude participation and sharing in Christ’s unique mediating role. According to Vatican II:

“Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but sharing in this one source.” LG 62

The title of Mary as mediatrix is linked to the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help. According to Adelino Paz Garcia:

In contemplating the Icon of Perpetual Help there is a lesson between the lines which does not appear in lines or sketches, but in the expression of the whole of the picture. Mary holds Christ in her arms and looks at men, who in fact are not visible, but are all those who pass through life. She stands as it were, between them; between Christ the Redeemer and men, and acts as intermediary, as mediatrix. Mary is a mediatrix of grace and friendship between Christ and men: for that reason she presents her Son before all men, she wishes to act as an intermediary. The Vatican Council II itself applied simultaneously to the Virgin two titles: Help and mediatrix (LG 62), as two expressions which define the role of the Virgin Mary. She is mediatrix: for that

reason she is Perpetual Help; for that reason she is mediatrix between Christ and men.”<sup>20</sup>

St. John Paul II affirms Mary as mediatrix through her intercessory role as mother of Jesus and as mother of all:

“Thus, there is a mediation: Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of its wants, needs and sufferings. She put herself ‘in the middle,’ that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother. She knows that, as such, she can point to her Son the needs of mankind and in fact, she has the right to do so. Her mediation is thus in the nature of intercession: Mary ‘intercedes’ for mankind.” *Redemptoris Mater* 21

Thus, through her intercession before her Son, Mary becomes the channel of grace and blessings. When a devotee comes before the Icon of the Mother of Perpetual bringing petitions, and the prayers are answered, he/she gives thanks not just to Mary but the triune God who is the source of all blessings.

When talking about grace, perhaps it is important to emphasize that grace can be defined simply as an experience God’s loving presence – a presence that sanctifies, vivifies, heals, saves, redeems, liberates and reconciles.<sup>21</sup> By giving birth to Jesus, Mary became the channel of grace – the grace that is Jesus himself - the Emmanuel – that God-with-us. Jesus as God’s grace brought salvation, healing, communion to the world and he continues to do so today.

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary – the Mother of Perpetual Help - is not simply a matter of venerating the Virgin Mary or praying for her intercession. The CBCP Pastoral Letter “Ang Mahal na Birhen” emphasizes the social mission flowing from such devotion:

“Our devotion to Mary should never lose sight of the present plight of the vast majority of our Filipino, brethren who live lives unworthy of human beings. These poor and oppressed brethren of ours are devotees of Mary, too; and they call out to her, their Mother, to ease their sufferings and free them from their chains. And surely

---

<sup>20</sup> Adelino Garcia Paz, *Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: History and Interpretation of the Icon* (Redemptorist Novena Community: Singapore, nd) , 141.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1979)

her maternal heart goes out to them. Her appeal comes to those of us who can help the helpless. Mary is the model of the perfect disciple of the Lord: “the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city, the disciple who works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy.” Devotion to Mary shows itself in works, and the works which we needed in the Philippines today are the works of justice and freedom from oppression. As the Church points out to us, our mission is “to be present in the heart of the world proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted.”

What matters is that the Mother of Perpetual Help is the model of how we are to live and act in our day to day life. Since Mary is the mediatrix and channel of grace, then we too should follow her example. When we, through our compassion, loving service, acts of generosity channel God’s grace and blessings to those in need, we become truly children – men and women - of Perpetual Help.