Unconventional Sisterhood
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Sign Me Sister, OSB

The Missionary Benedictines
invite
College Girls and Young Professionals
to a
SEARCH IN
Every third (3rd) Sunday of the Month
9 A.M. to 12 P.M.
at St. Scholastica’s Priory House
This is a Search For:
*The meaning of my Life
*My options and Life Choices
*The meaning of Vocation

The poster was prominent in canary yellow, taped to the front of an otherwise austere priory parlor desk. Here, colored footprints marked the fictive passage of an imaginary pilgrim before a series of hand-lettered signs pointing different directions. “Stop,” said one, “This way,” said another, and, beneath them all, a slightly crooked but emphatic caption read, “At each point in our lives we find ourselves . . . at the crossroads.” Similar posters are regularly displayed in the neighboring halls of St. Scholastica’s College (SSC), too. Moreover, the nuns advertise the sessions at holy Mass and send written invitations—sometimes as many as thirty per month—to self-identified prospectives. Not that attendance is always very high. Often, potential candidates call to say they can’t make it due to prior engagements; often, only two to five women actually show up. But at least those who do show up tend to be serious about the ensuing discussions and activities. And those with a genuine interest in the vocation—maybe fifty of the hundreds of women annually identified as possible applicants—usually make even
greater efforts to attend one of two longer and larger nationwide "searches in" held every autumn and spring.

(Re)searching In

But what, exactly, are searches in? Sister Mary Peter, subprioress and formator for the junior sisters, explained that young prospectives often don’t really know what to do or where to go upon first developing an interest in the convent. Thus, the Missionary Benedictines began hosting monthly meetings to provide interested parties with information about the vocation. During the sessions, participants are encouraged to both collectively and individually clarify issues of self, faith, and destiny under the guidance of religious sisters trained in counseling.

At nine o’clock A.M. every third Sunday of the month, then, one of the congregation’s aptly titled promoters responds with a welcome smile to the long and melodic chimes announcing visitors at the priory parlor door, ushering her guests into a small conference room off the reception area. Here, the stage is often set by music—nature sounds, perhaps, or Gregorian chants played for meditative purposes—while names, career titles, ages, addresses, and previous attendance statistics are quietly recorded on a sheet of paper passed around for the purpose. Introductions follow, accompanied by some discussion concerning the why and wherefore of everyone’s presence. So and so from Bacolod has wanted to be a nun ever since she was a little girl, but the SSC senior is simply curious about the signs, and the returning prospective claims that the sessions help her relax.

Nor do such explanations ever occasion anything less than enthusiastic nods and encouraging noises on the part of the promoter in charge, as prelude to a mandatory overview of convent life. What does it mean to be Missionary Benedictine? For one thing, notwithstanding the relative independence of the Philippine province (encompassing all Philippine Missionary Benedictine houses), it means belonging to a significantly international congregation in turn part of—but not administratively connected to—the Order of St. Benedict (OSB). For another thing, the nuns’ days consist of ora et labora, an injunction to pray and labor—the latter entailing a good deal of work both with the general populace and within congregation-run schools spread throughout the nation. Of course, prospectives first have to take a battery of tests to determine readiness; complete a one- to six-month period of aspirancy, during which they work, eat, and sleep with com-
munity members; formally apply to the congregation; and go through a long process of formation, involving three years in the novitiate and five in the juniorate. But we shouldn’t worry about any of that yet. Before seriously contemplating entry, prospectives are expected to attend multiple searches in, go on retreat with the sisters, and visit several houses overnight, meeting one on one with the already professed nuns. Any questions?

If not, promoters typically suggest moving on to storytelling, guided meditation, drawing, or some such activity purportedly intended to illuminate questions of presence and purpose. During one of the sessions I attended, for example, Sister Micha uncovered—and asked each of us to choose from—an extensive selection of black-and-white photographs. Nearly all depicted idyllic rural vistas or simple domestic scenes, with nary a hint of material decadence, much less the sex and violence so prominently featured in many popular Filipino magazines and newspapers. Cars, condos, kisses, and guns signify secular vice from the Benedictine perspective; the nuns wanted us to instead opt for virtue.

Not that such censorship guarantees the sort of proclamations of faith the sisters are looking for. Take Michelle, for instance. In response to Sister Micha’s queries, Michelle held up a photograph of a sunlit sheaf of wheat, vivid against a dark background. The sheaf, she told us, looked special, and she, too, had always wanted to be special. Truly special—although already her father’s favorite. Special to God. So perhaps she should become a nun? And Vera, for her part, chose a picture of people engaged in friendly conversation. Why that particular image? Well, she confessed, she felt very alone at this point in her life. In fact, she cried every night—she couldn’t help it. She wouldn’t be lonely in the convent, though, would she?

While respectful and understanding, however, Sister Micha didn’t exactly jump in with an affirmative response to tot up two more recruits to the order. Admittedly, the sisterhood does indeed afford members general admiration and constant camaraderie. But, notwithstanding common misperceptions concerning brainwashing tactics within Catholic monastic communities, the nuns are wary of applicants attracted to the vocation for the “wrong” reasons—because desirous of approbation or attention, for instance. Rather, the sisters want new members at least apparently motivated by a genuine desire to follow Christ. Like Sharon.

Indeed, Sharon, who opted for a photograph of laughing children, stood out. She had been an elementary school teacher, and the picture reminded her how much she loved working with children—a claim par-
particularly apt to endear her to a community responsible for the management of several schools. What’s more, she was interested in the convent because it represented a place within which she could carry out service to such populations as a means of serving God. In short, sisterhood, for her, meant both a positive and active choice rather than simply a possible solution to personal psychological issues. Nor was it surprising to subsequently discover that Sharon already felt quite certain of her vocation. And I felt quite certain she would be accepted, too. Sister Micha made it clear with smiles and approving noises that this was the sort of thing she liked to hear—the sort of thing, she intimated, that ensured entry.

After all, despite the claims that the Sunday sessions are primarily about honest and open soul-searching, the sisters involved make at least initial assessments of prospective potential here. Nor is that all. While cautious about inappropriate applicants and honest about the hardships involved, the promoters nevertheless play up the rewards of convent life. During another search in, for example, Sister Virginia—then vocation directress—presented a slide show based on a Philippine children’s tale about a little seed’s attempts to come to terms with dark soil, cold, and wind. The seed eventually finds the strength to push up through the earth, not only in spite of but also in response to its seemingly harsh environment. And we might think about this outcome, the sister observed, with respect to the seeds of faith in all of us. What might the fable tell us about the rewards of the religious life? Might not each of us also have the potential to become a big, beautiful tree?

The message here, of course, was that formation as a nun would actually nurture personal and spiritual development, however difficult or prohibitive the disciplines of convent life might initially appear. In short, Sister Virginia strategically rendered the parable an emotional and moral argument for the virtues of the vocation, all the more persuasive because she left it up to us to take the final step of self-identification with the seed, reinterpreting our own uncertainty and curiosity in terms of a metaphorical push toward the light.

**An “In” Thing**

The nuns take pains to paint the congregation as something more than merely monastic, too. In many ways, the Sunday sessions are meant to persuade attendees not only that being a nun is a good thing but also
that it is a fun thing—an “in” thing. The search-in activities—the storytelling, the presentations, the artwork, and so forth—are designed to be enjoyable; the sisters in charge are chosen partly because outgoing and friendly; snacks (often Skylakes crackers and popular American soft drinks) are always on hand. Moreover, promoters freely talk about congregation recreational activities, including their often rather boisterous feast-day celebrations, observed with great frequency and aplomb. Nor are the sisters being duplicitous. Although the actualities of many Filipino lives give the lie to the national stereotype, Filipinos as a cultural group take great pride in being carefree and fun loving and place great emphasis on entertainment and partying. As good Filipinas, the nuns are no exception, and their attempts to advertise their wilder side to possible applicants are certainly understandable given public assumptions about convent asceticism.

Of course, there are also more practical benefits to being Missionary Benedictine, although the nuns are careful to deemphasize the importance of such motivational incentives. Sister Virginia and Sister Micha openly discussed congregational opportunities for travel and education, for instance. The vocation also virtually guarantees regular meals, reliable housing, secure employment, career training, a scheduled social life, an easy introduction to like-minded friends, opportunities for personal counseling, social recognition and admiration, freedom from culturally exaggerated concerns about fashion and conspicuous consumption, and some degree of protection from many of the threats posed women without the habit and veil to signify their sanctity. Moreover, there is the promise of good care in one’s old age at a retreat house maintained largely for elderly, retired, and sickly Missionary Benedictines in the pinewood resort city of Baguio.

Then, too, the very phrase search in suggests the common use of terms such as sit in or teach in to signify forms of collective political demonstration. Although primacy is hardly placed on politics during the Sunday sessions, the parallels in usage here are not, I think, entirely random. The Missionary Benedictine searches in are very much designed to solicit participation in a collective ideological project and missionary community. Furthermore, the sessions themselves are intended to promote consciousness-raising: attendees are encouraged to ponder questions of purpose and social responsibility. The Missionary Benedictines are explicitly committed to action on behalf of the underprivileged, too, and all the sisters with whom I talked revealed a strong activist bent. As was made clear during the Sunday gatherings, this is a congregation very much concerned with social reform.
Of course, the convent still remains at least partly cloistered, and the boundaries between the inside and outside of the priory are well marked. Being Missionary Benedictine means being allowed to enter spaces forbidden outsiders, and being in the know about congregational rules, regulations, mission work, and so on. Moreover, initiation into the community is commonly referred to as “entry.” In part, then, searching in entails exploring the possibility of life inside a somewhat exclusive space, usually off-limits to the public.

In addition, the phrase suggests another distinction made across another highly culturally significant boundary—that separating the interior and exterior of the body. In actuality, the limits of the physical body are rather difficult to define, and the surfaces and orifices of the body exist in somewhat ambiguous liminal space between the inner and outer corpus. Within the Catholic faith, however, a distinction is made between the soul and the body—the body configured as a temporary vessel containing the far more significant and everlasting soul. When carried to an extreme, this sort of philosophy results in ascetic practices designed to repress physicality in demonstration of the supposedly superior powers of the will. Even in more moderate cases of Christian religious fervor, however, the distinction between body and soul is granted importance, and the Missionary Benedictines are no exception. While both Sister Micha and Sister Josephine freely acknowledged their sexuality, and more than one of my informants pointed to her waistline as evidence of a love of food, the nuns are still pledged to celibacy and grant their spirituality primacy over physical comfort or pleasure, regulating their own bodies and desires as a religious practice. Searching in may make particular sense, then, with reference to the importance congregation members place on the inner life as opposed to external conditions or ambitions.

**Pamphlets and Propaganda**

Of course, the searches in aren’t the only means of recruitment and introduction employed by the sisters. Like many Philippine religious societies, the Missionary Benedictines distribute informational pamphlets, effectively advertising their congregation to prospective candidates. One, for instance, prominently pictures a professed sister, bouquet in hand, standing by a hedge of flowers. The scene suggests an idyllic life of serenity; the pastoral setting and the smiling heroine present an appealing alternative to the thought of raising a family of bois-
urious children in metropolitan Manila. What’s more, the caption reads, “A woman in love.” No need to give up romance in taking up the vocation: being a nun means being in love, something arguably of great importance to generations of Filipinas raised on the melodrama of Philippine movies and paperback Harlequins published in Filipino and English alike.6

The romantic and altruistic meanings attached to the term love are conflated here, too. Alongside photographs of nuns singing, walking the slums, and talking with the poor, we are told that the Missionary Benedictine Sisters “praise God . . . pray for the needs of the Church and the world . . . teach in schools . . . work in hospitals . . . engage in socio-pastoral apostolates . . . initiate direct missionary work among tribal Filipinos . . . and participate in whatever task there is to spread God’s Kingdom . . . THEIRS IS THE JOY OF SERVICE . . . THE FULFILLMENT OF A WOMAN IN LOVE.” Moreover, an inscription on the back of the pamphlet proclaims, again in capital letters, “LOVE ALWAYS GIVES . . .” And, notwithstanding obvious differences between the love of mortals and the love of God, such rhetoric makes sense within the Philippine context. Love, for Philippine women, is typically understood not only in terms of passion and intimate evenings out but also in terms of highly gendered forms of service and self-sacrifice. While such service is often obscured or ignored within popular media representations of romance, it nevertheless provides a basis on which women, in particular, are publicly judged—as wives duty bound to care for their husbands and families. In short, the connection between “giving” and the “fulfillment of a woman in love” may not only make affective sense to but also appear obvious to many Filipinas.

Admittedly, the pamphlets not only construct the vocation in culturally significant romantic terms; they also normalize the vocation. Beneath photographs of young college students intended to exemplify the prototypical prospective, captions read, “She was just like any other girl. She was full of life and energy aching to be spent. Like any other girl, she had high hopes and ideals that gave sparkle to her eyes, lilt to her voice, and vigor to her stride. . . . Like any other girl, she dreamt of glorious things. And then, one day, her dreams came true: she fell in love. SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH GOD. SHE BECAME A MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE.” Entering the convent, then, represents something very ordinary and understandable rather than something incomprehensible, a critical and reassuring message insofar as the religious life does in fact represent a deviation from expectations of marriage and maternity within a highly conformist society.
Such messages probably temper possible candidate concerns about not being good enough, too. As yet another congregational brochure clarifies, ironically repudiating Michelle’s aforementioned assumptions, one doesn’t have to be “special” to be a sister: everyone can improve, given the right motivations. Nor should readers assume that the convent entails extreme self-discipline or personal sacrifice. There is that, true, but the sisters also enjoy amusements such as swimming, attending concerts, and participating in excursions of all sorts, albeit in moderation and without incurring great expenses. In short, the hardships of the cloister are balanced by happiness, just as in lay life—otherwise, ask the authors, why would so many Christians take up the vocation?

**Multiple Congregations, Multiple Choices**

The pamphlets aren’t just meant to persuade prospectives to become nuns, however; they are meant to persuade candidates of the benefits of being specifically Missionary Benedictine. After all, the congregation depends on its membership for survival, and the competition for applicants is fierce. The 1993 Catholic Directory of the Philippines lists 204 different religious “Institutes and Societies of Women,” several established in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with 10,048 professed members.

Nor is this multiplicity by any means homogenous. While 85 percent of the Philippines (approximately sixty-one million people) is at least nominally Catholic, significant divisions inhere between more conservative Catholics, moderates, progressives, and radicals (Shoesmith 1985). Such diversity is reflected in the variety of congregations to choose from in the Philippines, too—including congregations both more and less cloistered than the Missionary Benedictines. Consider the contemplative Benedictine Nuns of the Eucharistic King in Vigan, for example. While, for obvious reasons, most of the non-Missionary Benedictine nuns I encountered hailed from active congregations, I met Sister Lourdes on retreat at St. Scholastica’s Priory. She had requested temporary leave from the Vigan convent in order to explore the possibility of a less cloistered vocation. Having tried helping out with local drug addicts for more than a month, however, she had decided to return to her contemplative life. In marked contrast to my primary interviewees, she felt better able to serve the world by concentrating on prayer than by engaging in what she thought too specific and too limited forms of social work.
What’s more, she wasn’t very comfortable in urban environments. Despite her brash extroversion within the confines of the priory walls, she grew decidedly meek upon exiting the gates of St. Scholastica’s. In fact, Sister Lourdes wouldn’t even cross the streets of Manila without someone at her side: she needed someone to literally hold her hand on the way to the neighborhood market a block away. For her, the city exemplified an extreme instance of highly distasteful and frightening disorder, danger, and corruption. Indeed, I suspect it was Metro Manila itself, as much as any feelings of inadequacy she might have had as an activist, that persuaded her of the virtues of contemplation. Being Missionary Benedictine entails interacting with street vendors, beggars, and even jeepney pickpockets, and Sister Lourdes wanted refuge from such things. Notwithstanding their strict no-excuses seven-times-a-day prayer schedule, the Vigan nuns lead a comparatively quiet life inside the convent—doing garden work, washing dishes, and designing cards for sale.

Sister Patricia, in contrast, virtually lived on the streets of Manila. She belonged to the Religious of the Good Shepherd (RGS) and lived with three other RGS sisters in a small three-story concrete building situated squarely in the slum areas behind De La Salle University, an easy walk from both my own apartment and SSC. Nor did she keep a distance from her neighbors. As we made our way to her door one afternoon, she introduced a skeletal carpenter hard at work outside his shanty, several women washing clothes in well-used tubs of water, and entire families of barefoot, partially clothed children playing in the narrow dirt footpaths lining the barangay (neighborhood). While the children were her primary concern—she served as their mentor and was planning a community concert with them—the RGS sisters were also helping area residents build concrete houses to replace their cardboard/sheet metal/scrap wood homes. And it wasn’t charity, either, Sister Patricia assured me—the locals paid what they could and were proud of it.

Nor were the RGS the only ones actively engaged in such social work, although they represent an extreme with respect to worldly involvement. When I accompanied Sister Virginia to an ecumenical meeting of religious concerned about local public education, the other attendees spoke about work with farmers in the provinces, with overseas contract workers, with Filipina prostitutes, and even in the communications industry. Moreover, Manileño female religious congregations maintain innumerable hospitals, dispensaries, child welfare centers, homes for the aged, special centers for social education, and parish-based social service centers.
Why the Missionary Benedictines?

Most of the better-known schools in the Philippines are Catholic run, including the Missionary Benedictines’ twelve academies (representing half of their national mission centers). Indeed, the sisterhood has successfully recruited many new members from among both the graduates of and teachers involved with its colleges. Notably, however, the Missionary Benedictines also draw entrants attracted by the order’s activist reputation. Mona, for instance, chose the congregation because admiring of the sisters’ concern with social justice. She appreciated the fact that this was a specifically missionary branch of the order—the sisters’ missionary activity, in this case, focused more on the welfare of the Filipino masses than the conversion of pagans abroad. Helping the Aetas, a tribal Philippine minority, was missionary; working with the urban poor and agitating against the Bataan nuclear plant was missionary; educating others about and marching for women’s issues was missionary.

Sister Micha, on the other hand, stressed issues of equality in explaining her decision to become Missionary Benedictine. The Missionary Benedictines, she told me, represented a welcome contrast to many other congregations, including the elitist, dogmatic, and inflexible religious community under which she had studied as a child. Those nuns had blatantly favored their more affluent pupils—like Baby, who had mocked her peers for taking only one bath a day when she, with a flagrant waste of water, took three. Notwithstanding Baby’s arrogance, the sisters had let her do pretty much as she pleased. They were thoroughly prejudiced, or, as Sister Micha confessed to having mistakenly proclaimed to her mother one day in frustration, “prostituted.”

The Missionary Benedictines, in contrast, are relatively egalitarian. The congregation believes in solidarity with the poor: the rich are not given preference simply because rich. Nor is the congregation as internally or structurally hierarchical as the aforementioned French sisterhood, which gave clear priority to the community’s elders. The Missionary Benedictines train even their youngest members for positions of responsibility. Novices are often already placed as teachers or administrators in their third year of formation, and being a community superior is temporary and, at the very top levels, democratically determined rather than a function of chronological or canonical age.

Perhaps it isn’t surprising, then, that the congregation has been quite successful in recruiting new members over the years. Originally established in 1885 at a motherhouse in Tutzing, Bavaria, the Missionary Benedictines founded a Philippine house on September 14, 1906,
in answer to an appeal for religious assistance sent forth by the Apostolic Delegate (Hilpisch 1958). Within the next nineteen years, the sisterhood inaugurated schools in Albay, Opon, Bacolod, Angeles, Cavite, Mambajao, and Tacloban (Barrion 1982). And by 1993 the Philippine province had grown to include fifteen independent houses, twelve schools, the formation center, and twelve additional apostolate centers, all managed by 153 Filipina sisters, 13 novices, 17 postulants, and 24 foreign members.

The History of Philippine Women Religious

Such success stands in notable contrast to dwindling male interest in the vocation. Indeed, Catholic practice in the modern-day Philippines is highly gendered. Despite the greater power male religious have as priests, bishops, and pope-hopefuls within the church, more women than men now take up monasticism. During 1990–94, only 261 brothers and 690 priests associated with 56 male congregations were active within the archdiocese of Manila, in comparison to 2,259 sisters belonging to 143 female congregations.

Why such differences in number? In part, the answer lies in the fact that women in the Philippines are culturally configured as the guardians of morality: women who attend church are understood to be doing so not only for their personal salvation but also for that of their families. A broader range of vocational options is available to men in the Philippines, too—Filipino males can much more easily pursue social work or scholarship outside the monastery than can their female compatriots. But that isn’t all. The particular attraction the religious life holds for many Filipinas is a great deal more complicated, as will hopefully become evident throughout these pages.

And we might begin with a brief overview of the history of women religious in the Philippines. Admittedly, prior to and during the early Spanish conquest, this history is vague—pieced together primarily from scattered Spanish records of both indio practices and missionary endeavors. Moreover, such documentation is itself most certainly biased. What we know of pre-colonial island traditions is largely filtered through the eyes of male Christian Europeans, carrying their own assumptions about religion and personhood, and interacting with the indigenous peoples of the Philippines as representatives of Spanish imperialism with a strong military force to back them up. The archipelago’s past has also been widely mythologized for political and nos-
talgic reasons alike in many necessarily fictive twentieth-century accounts—arguably a matter of national longing for the reclamation of a “true,” if simultaneously highly imaginary, Philippine identity. Notwithstanding such historical uncertainties, however, the evidence does suggest that most pre-Hispanic Philippine tribes granted spiritual authority to female priestesses, or babaylanes, who mediated between humans and the spirit world through anitos—idolized ancestors—in order to heal the sick, appease the gods, and perform rites of thanksgiving (de la Costa 1961, McCoy 1982, Santiago 1995, Schumacher 1987). Unfortunately, if predictably, the Spanish considered such practices sinful, and began repressing babaylanism in the late 1500s and early 1600s—divesting priestesses of their belongings, arresting them, subjecting them to whipping and other forms of public shaming and ostracization, and generally persecuting them as the “devil’s handmaids.”

Nevertheless, some babaylanes went into hiding and otherwise succeeded in keeping their spiritual and medicinal traditions alive; indeed, female religio-medical expertise remains important in the cults of Mt. Banahaw today, not to mention the ma-arum tradition of Panay (Magos 1992) and native Bicolano healing practices (Cannell 1999), for example. Moreover, perhaps partly due to such traditions of female religio-moral expertise and guardianship, many Filipinas of the time began to develop a strong interest in the new, Christian, forms of worship. It is worth noting that the Spanish missionaries targeted women, in particular, too. In fact, enduring Filipina concern with “spirituality” coincided with Spanish assumptions about women as, ideally, virginal and matronly and meekly obedient to the word of God, albeit simultaneously unfit for the priesthood because intellectually incapable and corporeally dangerous. At least some of missionary priests doubtless also maintained a rather perverse interest in the “special” conversion of native women—as potential sexual objects over whom they could exert their sway as representatives of God, whether in the voyeuristic confines of the confessional, or, more literally, in bed (Santiago 1995). In addition, given their own presuppositions concerning the role of mothers in socialization, the Spanish may well have focused their efforts on women in hopes of expanding church influence over future generations.

Not that Catholicism could simply be mapped onto precolonial tradition, though; Christianity doubtless attracted a new and different sector of the indigenous population—Filipinas increasingly skeptical of marriage under church terms, and more interested in achieving divine favor through ascetic practices alone. After all, “whereas the Filipino
priestesses were married and bore children because they integrated mystical and physical fulfillment together in a state called *kagampan*, the Malay word for fulfillment—the Spaniards introduced the Catholic ideal of spiritual perfection through “continence,” the sacrifice of physical needs” (Santiago 1995, 163–4). Thus, the *babaylanes* gave way to *beatas*—“blessed” lay women affiliated with the church, bound by simple vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty, and subject to the authority of the governor-general, diocesan ordinaries or bishops, and provincials or superiors of those religious orders responsible for maintaining their *beaterios* (Santiago 1995). And, while the church initially prohibited the full admission of *indias* into Philippine convents on the grounds of “impurity” and “incompetence”—notwithstanding the objections of many female congregations themselves—a 1697 royal order decreed native Filipinas of pure blood eligible for convents, thereby granting the possibility of full Filipina sisterhood (Torres 1992, Santiago 1995; Schumacher 1987). Nor was *india* interest in the convent lacking; eight of nine local female religious communities established under Spanish rule were in fact founded in whole or part by Filipinas themselves (Santiago 1995).

**Faith**

While such historical Filipina religiosity foreshadows the current Philippine situation, however, my informants placed more emphasis on faith than on history in explaining their profession. Not that the “calling” is easy to discuss analytically; although the strongest argument for entry into the Missionary Benedictine world, feelings of inner compulsion are difficult to assess from the outside, and subjective experience is difficult to objectively verify. On the other hand, we might do well to move beyond questions of theological plausibility (or psychological pathology) to a perhaps more fruitful exploration of the ways in which the nuns spoke of their vocation as inspired by something very elusive to the outsider: a profound spirituality, tied up in significant ways with personal identity and morality.

In specific, my informants talked about entering the convent in response to what they experienced as a pressing, heaven-sent summons. For some, like Sharon, this summons is readily identified and obeyed; for others, the calling is an imperative so intense as to demand an answer even in the face of conscious resistance. Whether willing or reluctant, however, all made it clear that they ultimately felt as if they
had no choice. Sister Felipe, for example, confessed to having prayed to fail the first application test. When she passed, though, she felt compelled to enter. While she hadn’t ever planned on being a nun, she felt pushed from inside. It wasn’t a matter of deciding that entry was the best thing, it was more simply a matter of knowing. Just knowing—feeling you had to do it. If one really did have a vocation, it couldn’t be ignored. Faith, then—faith large enough to override culturally significant claims concerning familial duty and appropriate womanhood, intense enough to justify marked personal sacrifices, and deep enough to compel long hours of prayer and work—is of primary importance to the decision to take up the Missionary Benedictine life.

Appeals and Appeasement

In this case, however, the sisters’ proclamations of faith—their remarkably diverse—diverged a great deal in kind and tone from the sort of Philippine Catholicism practiced by the general populace. While the nuns spoke of profoundly transformative mystical experiences manifested in a long-term commitment to the congregation, my lay acquaintances spoke of ritual, tradition, and dogma, all selectively emphasized and deemphasized depending on context and self-interest.

Most young Filipino Catholics initially develop their religious sensibilities in the context of Sunday church services, lavish holiday celebrations, melodramatic media coverage, and the omnipresence of Christian imagery and artifacts throughout much of the Philippines. Such socialization is productive both of the importance granted household altars and the multicolored icons placed atop jeepney dashboards, and of the Filipino bahala na—a phrase essentially meaning “It’s in God’s hands now”, generally employed as a justification for the abdication of responsibility in the face of seeming personal impotence. Faith, in such instances, is called upon where outside, uncontrollable, forces impinge on the everyday; it is not a matter of constant daily concern as much as something taken up as a preventative measure or practiced in the face of potential hardship and actual crisis. Personal fortune and misfortune alike are popularly attributed to God’s pleasure, displeasure, or whim—and prayer, here, functions as at least a potential means of influencing God through placation, thanks, and appeal.

Consider Emily’s claims to devotion, expounded one afternoon over merienda in a local restaurant providing at least some refuge from the heat. She announced, point blank, that she knew God existed. Why was
she so certain? Well, she explained, she was studying to become a dentist, which ultimately entailed taking several certification exams. She hadn’t prepared very well for one of them, though, and thought she’d fail for sure. She made a lot of mistakes on the test, too. But beyond all explanation, she passed! She actually passed. It couldn’t have been her own doing, she said. It had been a miracle. God had answered her prayers.

Nor, at first glance, does Emily’s tale seem substantially different from the why-I’m-a-nun story Sister Virginia told me of having been spared death in a traffic accident by, as she puts it, the grace of the Virgin Mary. In both cases, we are talking of events pronounced miraculous in retrospect because of some sort of salvation in the face of crisis. However, while Sister Virginia’s experience was both truly outside her control and intensely transformative, ultimately leading her to reorient her life toward religious service, Emily’s experience was much more insular and isolated in its effects and ramifications. If her passing grade was miraculous, it was miraculous in proportion to her own irresponsibility; in addition, her assessment was dictated more by her failure to find any other logical explanation for the events at hand than by the shock of mortality Sister Virginia referenced. Moreover, while Emily responded by going to church, praying more regularly, and worrying about sin, she did all of this with greater concern for herself than for the meaning of life. Her worship was highly selective and conditional, primarily oriented toward cajoling or appeasing God in times of need or want.

Emily wasn’t alone in displaying such a functional take on faith, either. Mrs. Seth, my landlady, evidenced a similar understanding of Catholicism. In many ways, she was a pious woman. She gave to charities and financially supported more than one godchild because she believed these moral things to do, things that would get her positive points in heaven. She regularly attended Sunday mass, too, and, took me to simbang gabi, early morning Masses held at four or five A.M. for nine days prior to Christmas, marking the great devotion of those awake enough to attend. On the other hand, she often spoke of money, bragged about the new family computer and car, and reminisced about the Marcos years when her family had “known someone” and thus had not paid airport taxes for their business. In short, she remained primarily interested in her own welfare and was in fact willing to manipulate others to such ends. However motivationally important, religion, for her, still ultimately represented a bid for God’s favor on Earth and a place in paradise. And why not? God was simply another power to be
dealt with, not unlike the government authorities and business contacts she similarly cajoled and attempted to bribe.

Praying for Rice

The Missionary Benedictines’ spirituality, on the other hand, was not nearly so placatory and manipulative in character. While the nuns’ faith still mandated bent knees and bowed heads, it was also, and more significantly, a matter of service, superseding the more everyday pursuit of status and wealth. The sisters didn’t pray for good grades or economic success or even security in the afterlife; rather, they prayed for others, particularly underprivileged and exploited others.

Nor were the Missionary Benedictines especially attached to the dogmas and rituals of popular Philippine Catholicism. Sister Virginia, for instance, claimed it wasn’t the name or details of faith that mattered, it was how one lived in the world. Many atheists, agnostics, and pagans, she observed, were more godly than many Catholics. By the same token, Sister Josephine told her theology classes a story about an atheist, a Buddhist, and a Catholic bishop at heaven’s gate—the first two allowed in because they had lead good lives, the last denied entry because he had not loved fully or properly.

And Sister Micha, for her part, took positive delight in shocking and mocking strict traditionalists. She didn’t think much of many “Solid Catholics”—Katoliko Sarado. Did I know what that was? Sarado, she explained, literally means “solid,” as in “very devout,” but it also means “closed,” sometimes “closed with lock and key.”15 Like Consuela, a woman bearing some responsibility in SSC’s grade school. Indeed, the first time we set up an interview, the sister and I were interrupted on our way to “somewhere people couldn’t find us” by Consuela, brimming over with enthusiasm about the upcoming 1995 World Youth Day and full of questions about the liturgy she knew the sister was working on. Catching sight of my then still strange white face by the sister’s side, she immediately identified me as a delegate and babbled on to Sister Micha about how wonderful the whole event would be, and how she could hardly believe that JPII (Pope John Paul II) would be coming to Manila. Sister Micha looked at Consuela with a dubious expression, however, commenting wryly how seeing JPII alone would probably get the woman to heaven: no need to worry about the homeless being pushed off the streets to make way for the papal visit.

Moreover, when I confessed later that afternoon that I didn’t sub-
scribe to any institutional faith, the sister’s immediate response was one of regret. If only she had known, she exclaimed, she would have loved to tell Consuela she was consorting with an agnostic! She could just imagine the look of shock on the woman’s face. Too many people in the Philippines still thought agnosticism and atheism sinful. I represented an opportunity to challenge such prejudices, though. Indeed, ever after she tagged me “heathen” and pointedly brought up my “unconventional” religious views and “feminist” politics in conversation with others. Nor was this just for fun. I represented an opportunity for Sister Micha to introduce potentially inflammatory perspectives to more conservative friends and acquaintances without directly putting herself on the line.

After all, the sister espoused a rather radical understanding of Catholicism. Like Sister Mary Peter, who said she’d only barely tolerated her lola’s (grandmother’s) piety because of the sweets she got after church, Sister Micha claimed to have come to the convent a virtual infidel and admitted to having skipped her novenas, ignored the Angelus, disregarded the rosary, and dragged her feet while her siblings sprang to life at the sound of the chapel bells in their Iloilo barangay. It was funny, she added, how “God called the one without hope.” Not that she hadn’t done what was necessary to avoid going to hell. She had been raised a “regular Catholic,” and, as such, had been baptized and confirmed, obeyed the Ten Commandments, and regularly participated in the Eucharist and confession. But nothing beyond that. What’s more, at church with her lola, she had played around: instead of “pray for us,” for example, she sometimes said “pray for rice.”

Of course, in hindsight, Sister Micha thought the alteration relevant: she had been praying for the hungry, in solidarity with the poor. But she wouldn’t have believed herself destined for the vocation at the time. She hadn’t liked the nuns supervising her as a child, and as a young adult, she had little interest in theology and the sisterhood. Rather, upon graduation from high school, she went into chemical engineering because it was high status and well paying, not to mention much in demand. While marriage had never really been in the picture, the sister had dreams of getting rich quick, buying a condominium, purchasing a car, and finally emigrating to the United States.

Having fun had been important, too, and as a university undergraduate, she had become involved with a popular and intelligent barkada (social clique), among whom she at long last found friends “on the same wavelength.” Moreover, for the first time, she began speaking out when asked questions and even debating points of contention with her
teachers. And she realized she could hold her own around men. Indeed, the sister told me, she finally began to feel more of a person than a nonperson.

Funny thing, though; when she at last had it all, at least according to most social measures of success, she had an “identity crisis.” In her third year of college, she suddenly began feeling very depressed. Her life seemed to be deteriorating, and her dreams started to look empty. How important were all those material things, after all?

But her barkada was still interested in the good life, and her friends simply couldn’t comprehend her own change in outlook when she broached the subject. So she continued to go out at night, acting as if nothing was different. She hid her concerns from her parents, too, because she didn’t want to worry them. Rather, she went to the school psychologist in hopes of some useful guidance. Then, after she ended up listening to the counselor instead of the other way around, she tried a priest. He hadn’t been any better, however; he simply told her to pray, saying, “Crucify your sufferings with Christ.” What did that mean? It was very ambiguous and not much help.

Nor, in the end, did help come from anyone else. It came, instead, in subtler forms. For instance, on her way to school one day, Sister Micha impulsively ventured inside the university chapel. To her amazement, she felt an immense sense of relief, “just like at an oasis,” simply sitting there. It was her first sign of consolation after a whole year. So, she began attending daily Mass more regularly—not routinely, but whenever she felt like it. She didn’t even really talk to God during these visits to the chapel, either; it was just that they somehow, mysteriously, provided respite from her inner turmoil.

And, after a few months of this, she was struck by the possibility of entering the convent. She had reservations but reasoned with herself that she could always leave if she didn’t like the life. Thus, following a two-week practicum visit to Manila, she spent a night at the Marikina Formation house, encouraged by both her mother and her mother’s sister, the latter a Missionary Benedictine herself. Indeed, while Sister Micha’s father objected to her vocation, her mother claimed to have actually prayed for it. In fact, the sister laughed, this was what she should say the next time someone asked her why she became a nun: her mother had prayed for it—forget the longer story!

Seriously, though, when she arrived in Marikina, the vocation director had broken protocol by giving her the entire entrance exam right away. But Sister Micha was only nineteen years old then, and, while the sisters thought her a good prospect, all of them—a different nun at
every meal—advised her to finish her degree first. Of course, she had planned on doing so all the while and had found it somewhat disconcerting to be tested for suitability so quickly. Nor was she sure of her vocation at the time. Upon returning to college, she became involved with a man she found very attractive—he was kind and intelligent, and she quite enjoyed the physical aspect of the relationship. She later went out with someone she met back in Iloilo, too. He was nine years older than her and had a car, a house, and a steady job as a station manager. Much as she liked both men, though, marriage had never held much appeal for her; in fact, she had never really been able to imagine pledging herself to only one person.

**Frozen Moments**

Then, too, Sister Micha had experienced what she termed “frozen moments,” now imprinted forever in her mind. These weren’t miracles of God’s intervention on her behalf, as in Emily’s case—or, for that matter, were they miracles born of crisis, as in Sister Virginia’s case. Nevertheless, they were revelatory, awe inspiring, and transformative. For example, one evening she had been sitting on the windowsill of her parents’ house, watching the street at dusk. She had always liked watching the world at sunset—it was a peaceful time. This particular evening, however, the scene and in fact the entire experience, had been compelling. She vividly remembered the way the street had looked, all dark and empty but for an island in the middle populated by silhouetted pine trees. This, she said, was where she saw God.

There had also been an incident with her favorite niece—her second sister’s daughter. Her second sister had become pregnant before Sister Micha entered the convent, and Sister Micha confessed to having been very curious about the whole process. She had talked to her sister’s tummy, pestered her with questions about the pregnancy, and watched the entire birthing with avid eyes. She had subsequently become very attached to the infant, eagerly participating in her care, even regularly changing her diapers. She enjoyed holding her niece, too, but usually held the girl away when she urinated, on diaperless occasions. One day, though, she hadn’t felt compelled to do this. So her niece had reminded her, saying, “Auntie, I peed.” But Sister Micha hadn’t been upset at all; somehow, the whole incident suddenly seemed perfectly natural, and she stopped worrying about her dress.
She simply felt at peace and full of love for the girl. And, again, she felt God’s presence.

Nor is it insignificant that Sister Micha claims to have found God not in the rituals or sacred spaces of institutionalized Catholicism but instead during periods of calm, inner quiet, and love in the midst of ordinary life. While she took pains to present herself to me (and everyone around her) as fun loving and carefree, in proper Filipino fashion, she was in fact quite concerned with doing things right and was apt to fret about her responsibilities. Both in contemplating her window view and holding her niece, however, the sister seems to have been able to “forget herself” in the appreciation of something larger.

What’s more, although Sister Micha’s narrative may appear highly unorthodox with respect to popular understandings of Philippine Catholicism, which seemingly have little to do with urinating nieces and dusky roads, her understanding of faith makes sense with reference to global theories of spirituality, as distinct from institutionalized religion. Scholars of religion and self-professed visionaries alike commonly speak of mystical experience in terms of the sorts of strongly emotionally compelling feelings of unity and harmony indexed here. Not that I intend to prematurely label Sister Micha a mystic or attribute excessive significance to her frozen moments; rather, I simply wish to emphasize the importance of taking such tales seriously. After all, something in those very personal frozen moments persuaded the sister to respond in the affirmative when the Missionary Benedictines finally invited her to join them—a major, radical, life-transforming decision overriding her prior ambitions for material success.

Aspiring to a Mountain

Likewise, Sister Placid, a petite woman with an open face lined more by smiles than age, had her own moments of calm and self-transcendence to speak of, in this case attached to the geography of her childhood:

I was born in the Bicol region . . . where Mayon volcano is. And that landscape has very much influenced . . . my childhood and probably my psyche. . . . There was something elemental about it, so that even nowadays, the serenity of that mountain has always been very much a part of my psyche. . . . Many of the sisters [have] acknowledged . . . my serenity. In one cultural evening,
for example, in the juniorate, the novices were giving us characterizations by single words, and that’s the name they gave me—“Serene.” . . . I’m not saying I never get uptight. I have had all my own bad times in my life, but the fact that I was characterized that way when I was still in the middle and late twenties is an indication of what I call this very subtle influence of that volcano—I identify with it, it looks woman to me. . . . Always in the morning when I would . . . make my morning prayer, I had a little statue of Mary the Madonna on my table, but when I pray I always turn to the volcano. Also in the moonlight it is so beautiful, you know, when you see its silhouette very sharply, and yet the luminous moonlight gives it such a mysterious character. I can’t describe it. . . . Such vivid memories for me. . . . One of my most vivid memories as a child—I was playing with the neighborhood children, and some of them were my cousins, and, as usual with children, we fight. And just at that time, the sun was setting. Suddenly, we all stopped when somebody noticed—you know, Mayon is often enveloped by clouds along the crater . . . it’s very rare that it’s completely free of clouds. And then, at sunset, I don’t know what was the play of light in the atmosphere, but the clouds were a bright rose pink . . . sunset colors. . . . It was so beautiful, we just stopped playing, just watched it. We were still children, I was not even in school yet, probably four years old—and then, afterwards, it faded, of course, after the sun had set. . . . Gradually it got paler and paler until all the colors were gone, and one of my friends said, “You see, because we were quarreling, that’s why the Mayon hid its beauty.” And I remembered that for days and days afterwards—I was always making sure we were not quarreling, that kind of thing.

In short, Sister Placid locates her spirituality in Mount Mayon, emphasizing both its affective appeal for her and transformative effect on her. She claims to have become a pacifist early on in response to Mayon; moreover, she speaks of the mountain as having foreshadowed both her vocation and personality. Ironically, of course, however bucolic in the everyday, the volcano’s peaceful exterior actually masks great explosive and destructive potential. But perhaps this itself is half the sister’s point. Mayon’s serenity betokens inner power, and, with the mountain as both example and compulsion, the sister identifies herself as simultaneously passionately committed to her beliefs and capable of
distancing herself from the sort of pettiness indexed by the quarreling of her childhood playmates.

Not that Sister Placid is alone in identifying the mountain as a force with which to be reckoned; Mayon is in fact already storied:

The volcano has a legend. . . . There was a beautiful princess, or the daughter of a chief, in ancient times, in pre-Hispanic Philippines. And she had many suitors. But the one suitor whom she fell in love with, her father disliked . . . and, as usual in the old primitive societies, the father was the one who had control. And so he made sure that the lovers were separated. Then, at some point, tragedy strikes them. But the woman was buried in a plain place, and where she was buried the ground started swelling and got larger and larger, and the swell got larger and larger and very tall and came out this beautiful cone-shaped volcano. And the place where this was came to be called Daraga. Daraga is still one of the towns at the foot of the mountain, and *daraga* means “young unmarried girl” in Bicol, and she is called *daragang Magayon*—*magayon* means “beautiful.” So it’s a beautiful girl. So the place is called after her, Daragang Magayon. And since then the mountain came to be called Mayon, a corruption of *Magayon*. And also according to the legend, the reason why there are always these clouds shrouding the volcano is the lover who died, his spirit remains with her, they are united already after that death, and he’s always there to protect her. It’s a beautiful legend.19

A beautiful legend of a beautiful maiden—yet one, nevertheless, with her own agency. The sister’s heroine follows her heart in defiance of fatherly protests, reaping supernatural rewards when reborn a mountain in symbolic reclamation of her right to establish her own life course. Nor was this an inappropriate story for Sister Placid to be telling. On some level, at least, it is about familial resistance of the sort experienced by many Missionary Benedictine aspirants, themselves *daraga*, and themselves in love, if with God rather than any mortal man. Moreover, the protagonist here becomes nothing less than a volcano; a volcano again, with which Sister Placid identifies, repudiating modern-day Philippine stereotypes of femininity as fragile and weak.

But Mayon isn’t only an icon of independence in the face of patriarchal expectations, it is also a Philippine landmark, and, once more, the sister claims to have developed her sense of self, not to mention a highly
nationalistic politics, quite literally in its shadow. Although she calls herself Catholic, her faith, like Sister Micha’s, is unorthodox; her spirituality is in fact critically informed by alternative, indigenous mythologies themselves quite concretely grounded in Philippine geography.

**Bargaining with God**

Sister Josephine, in contrast, explained her vocation in terms of “bargaining with God.” Like Sister Micha, she had little initial interest in the convent. She was never particularly devout when young. After college, though, she began teaching math and science at the Missionary Benedictine academy in Legaspi, and one of the nuns stationed there began pressuring her to take the entrance exam:

She kept asking and asking. I didn’t know what to do. So, to let her keep quiet, I said, “OK, I’ll take the test.” And then she told me... “You passed the test.” “Oh, God,” I said, “what did I get myself into?” I said, “Now you have to make a decision. You’re going to enter?” “I’m not going to enter,” I said, “I’m not interested.” But I had a problem. I said, “What am I going to do now?”

Ultimately, of course, she joined the convent because convinced that God had given her a sign, leaving her with little choice. Not that she was entirely passive about it (indeed, Ileto [1979] and others have contested the emphasis Lynch [1962] places on the importance of maintaining “smooth interpersonal relations” at all costs in the Philippines). Sister Josephine had enough spunk in her to resist her father outright, and she doubtless would not have let herself be pushed into the vocation were it really anathema to her. On the other hand, it remains notable that Sister Josephine denies having actively pursued membership in the congregation. At least in the beginning, she told me, she simply fell into it—if all the more easily given a long-standing desire to live a life of service rather than getting married and having children.

At the same time, the sister assured me that she had only stayed in the convent because of a growing understanding of her spirituality as a religious calling. Once inside, she began to recognize her work, as well as her worship, as the expression of a profound and compelling faith. Indeed, when her father cajoled her into returning home for two years in an attempt to change her mind about the convent, she realized that
she really did have a vocation. While she wasn’t entirely happy with the mandate to obedience, she felt she belonged in the congregation, like it or not. God wanted her there, so there she would stay.

**Crossing the Road**

Mona, one of the Missionary Benedictine novices, also talked of inner, psychological, resistance to a vocation for which she nevertheless felt destined and to which she nevertheless had committed herself. While showing me around the Marikina grounds on my first visit to the novitiate, she confessed that she had been very skeptical of Catholicism as a student in her twenties. How could anyone prove God’s existence, and if God did exist, how could all the suffering in the world be explained? Religious friends of hers, including a priest with whom she began having philosophical debates, responded that all of that was a part of God’s plan and cautioned her that faith was not necessarily rational. But she still wanted proof and could poke holes in every statement of proof offered her.

Then, one day, she had a vision. She was walking by a local church with friends when a shining crucifix appeared before her, bringing her to her knees in the middle of the road, oblivious to the afternoon traffic. Suddenly, it felt overwhelmingly important to acknowledge God’s power and presence in her life. It was as if God knew she needed some sort of sign because she was having such trouble with the logic of the faith. And when she subsequently experienced a miraculous recovery from an apparently life-threatening illness, her vocation became clearer yet.

Again, then, Mona spoke not of a devout Catholic upbringing rendering the sisterhood particularly attractive but rather of faith construed in terms of both resistance and compulsion. While God’s call came in the form of a cross, her faith was nevertheless confirmed outside the church and was born more from doubt than from religious habit. Indeed, Mona might be seen as a modern day Job, her very skepticism marking the strength of her philosophical concern with issues of purpose and being.

On the other hand, in constructing both her faith and her profession in terms of divine imperative, Mona, like Sister Josephine, is ultimately effectively displacing responsibility onto God for what is in fact a highly personal and subjective decision, rather than claiming the vocation as her own choice. God’s call, imagined as something tran-
scendent of human concerns, affords an effective means of legitimating a rather unorthodox and often unpopular decision. Both the intensity and the simple necessity of what is experienced and articulated as a summons from Christ provide critical justification for the adoption of a profession that, while highly respected, is also often antithetical to parental wishes. Familial disapproval notwithstanding, Catholicism recognizes and valorizes vision, and who can argue with God?

**Aspirant or Ethnographer?**

Of course, while faith so intense as to be productive of extraordinary experiences is of critical importance for most Missionary Benedictines, my own confessed agnosticism was not necessarily considered an obstacle to the vocation, at least not when understood as mere innocence (if not ignorance). Although I attempted to make it clear that my attendance at convent functions was not religiously motivated, my presence on priory grounds gave rise to a certain degree of confusion. Much to my discomfort, my obvious (and intense) curiosity about the sisters’ lives made more sense to many of them as a summons from God than as anthropology. Mona repeatedly attempted to get me to take communion, Sister Josephine encouraged me to contact the congregation’s American branches, and Sister Virginia was particularly insistent about interpreting my interest as something more than a mere quest for ethnographic information. With the assurance that she could “usually sense it,” she discussed the entire process of conversion with me, asked questions concerning my outside responsibilities and my parents’ faith, and told me she deemed me “ready” for entry should I so choose.20

Nor did the fact that most of the sisters associated anthropology with its more “traditional” forms help. When I persisted in emphasizing my role as an ethnographer, I was asked why I wasn’t studying the mountain tribes, the displaced Aetas, Muslim groups in Mindanao, or other provincial populations. What could I possibly want with Christian, “civilized” nuns in Manila? Weren’t the “primitive,” the “pagan,” and “pure” culture the more proper concerns of anthropology? And why was I doing so much intensive, face-to-face interviewing instead of conducting surveys, distributing questionnaires, and employing other sorts of “objective” techniques in order to prove whatever hypotheses I was investigating? Notably, such queries created an interesting research problem, forcing me to repeatedly reexamine my own methods and intentions and sometimes leaving me in the awkward position of having
to reject well-meaning attempts to help me come up with something more closely approximating what my querents took to be more appropriate investigatory techniques.

What of my own understandings of the ethnographic project, though? In actuality, I initially decided to conduct research with the congregation because intrigued by the Missionary Benedictines’ involvement with and support of the Institute of Women’s Studies (IWS), one of the Philippines’ first centers for “feminist” education and outreach. When I first began fieldwork, it seemed paradoxical to me that nuns committed to a church wherein women are both structurally subordinate and subject to significant prohibitive and representational limitations would have become involved with such a ground-breaking operation. How did the sisters reconcile their faith and their feminism? How were they negotiating new forms of womanhood as devout Catholics?

Moreover, what did all of this mean within the Philippine context? Notably, Philippine history is rife with conflict, marked by multiple colonialist influences and productive of significant creative resistance, resilience, appropriation, and syncretism. Prior to Spanish colonization in 1565, the Philippines did not exist as a nation. Rather, what are now the Philippine Islands were inhabited by linguistically and ethnically distinct indigenous peoples living in separate (though loosely economically and politically linked) settlements scattered across the islands—a multicultural *halo-halo* (“mix-mix”) of sorts. All of this changed, however, with the establishment of a strong Spanish military and religious presence in the archipelago. The Spanish forced many of the island tribes into established lowland settlements in order to facilitate both taxation and proselytization, ignoring and obscuring tribal differences in identifying the Philippines as a unified territory under the rule of King Philip. Thus, the nation was initially configured as such not by its citizenry but by outsiders with question-able economic, political, and, significantly, missionary colonialist motives.

Indeed, Catholicism in particular served as a highly effective tool of colonialism here. The Spanish suppressed the indigenous peoples’ resistance efforts, in part, by converting them to a version of the faith that forwarded Spanish imperialist purposes. While the missionaries and priests effecting the conversion of local tribes did not necessarily see themselves as pawns of the imperial regime, they did see themselves as purveyors of truth sent by God to bring the ignorant into his fold. As proselytizers with privileged access to the divine, they believed them-
selves destined to save pagan Filipino souls—and, in order to accomplish this end, they quite literally forced the abandonment of indigenous religious practices in favor of the confessional and required church services.\textsuperscript{27}

On the other hand, the Spaniards’ very attempts to both convert the indigenous peoples they encountered and to render the Philippine islands an easily locatable, governable, and politically defensible entity ironically fueled the emergence of a new, revolutionary, collective consciousness on the part of tribes whose previously divergent histories suddenly became coincident in a tale, often as not, of imperial abuse.\textsuperscript{28} Although the elite favored by the Spanish were hardly eager to overthrow their patrons, many Filipinos nevertheless resisted the colonialist presence, sometimes in militant fashion, and sometimes through selective and nominal accommodation facilitating the appropriation of Spanish terms and customs for Filipino purposes.\textsuperscript{29} What’s more, Catholicism in particular provided justification for rebellion; many newly Christianized Filipinos took their religion seriously, even to the point of modeling their own resistance movement on the Christian \textit{pasyon} cycle (Ileto 1979).\textsuperscript{30} In fact, nationalist hero José Rizal’s 1896 martyrdom at the hands of the Spanish prompted hitherto hesitant \textit{ilustrados}—the propertied, well-educated upper class—to rally behind the religio-nationalist \textit{Katipunan}, led by Andres Bonfacio and, subsequently, Emilio Aguinaldo (Goodno 1991; Karnow 1989; Steinberg 1994).\textsuperscript{31} 

While the \textit{Katipunan} insurgency proved successful enough to force the Spanish—then preoccupied in Cuba—to enter negotiations with Aguinaldo, however, Spanish concessions were only nominal (as was Aguinaldo’s disavowal of the rebellion), and the situation was soon further complicated by the Spanish-American War. Filipino dreams of freedom ran counter to an American preoccupation with manifest destiny and the “white man’s burden.” In 1899, following Dewey’s 1898 victory over the Spanish in Manila Bay, the United States government voted to annex the Philippines. Shortly thereafter, the United States captured Aguinaldo and, with the collaboration of the Filipino elite, set up a neocolonialist civil government under William Taft (Goodno 1991; Karnow 1989; Steinberg 1994). Economic policies favoring American-owned corporations were also established, and an English-only educational system was instituted in a supposed gesture of benevolence, rendering English the first national (but foreign-derived) Filipino language.\textsuperscript{32} 

Moreover, while the United States granted the Philippines commonwealth status in 1935 and granted the republic independence in 1946,
America has retained a strong hand in Philippine politics (Schirmer and Shalom 1986). Filipino nationalists in fact still fault the United States for both supporting Ferdinand Marcos’s presidency in the late 1960s and “increasing the level of military aid to the Philippines, particularly weaponry that could be used for counter-insurgency” (Schirmer and Shalom 1986, 226) after Marcos explicitly violated limits imposed by the Philippine constitution on presidential terms in office by declaring martial law in 1972.

On the other hand, what nationalist Filipinos term the “U.S.-Marcos dictatorship” was overthrown following accusations of government responsibility for the 1983 assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino Jr., a renowned Marcos critic and opponent. The murder served to catalyze long-festering popular resistance to Marcos—ultimately culminating in the nonviolent Church-led “EDSA revolution” of 1986, during which the Manileño masses effectively forced Marcos to relinquish the presidency to Corazon Aquino, widow of the assassinated senator.

While Aquino and her successors have made steps toward stabilizing the Philippines, however, the events of the Marcos years have left their mark on the nation, not to mention my Missionary Benedictine informants. Notably, many of my interviewees claimed to have first developed a commitment to social activism on behalf of the underprivileged while participating in mass action against Marcos; what’s more, their missionary activity hearkens back to a strong strain of religious radicalism running throughout Philippine history.