

Malleability of Roman Catholicism: The Creation of the Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels, Belgium

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ABSTRACT. Building on research that problematizes how Filipinos embrace in varying degrees Roman Catholicism, my study probes how differentiated Filipino migrants intimately explore and experience Roman Catholicism's malleability as they create the Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels, Belgium. Using data gathered from the archives, interviews, and participant observation, this ethnographic study demonstrates that "standing for the marginalized" among the Roman Catholic principles, socio-political circumstances in Belgium, and the interpersonal relations within the Filipino community as potent forces for religious authorities as well as Filipino Catholic leaders' desire and project. The study argues that these areas unveil the Filipino Catholics' strategic moves to create the Filipino chaplaincy in Brussels and the ways in which the Filipino Catholics take their share in objectifying Roman Catholicism's very structuring mechanism, in the process.

1.0. Introduction

Recent studies in the anthropology of Catholicism have provided me the impetus I needed to look into how Roman Catholicism operates in the lives of Filipino migrants as they take part in creating the Filipino Chaplaincy of the Archdiocese of Brussels-Mechelen in Belgium and participating in the religious activities it sanctions.

There are 12,419 Filipinos in Belgium, as per the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (2013) estimate. This is way above the 3,529 Filipinos officially registered with the Belgian National Institute of Statistics, according to the Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines (2014). Most Filipinos take on domestic-related jobs for lobbyists, consultants, media practitioners, and the embassy- and regional delegation personnel connected or working for EU [European Union] and other international institutions, such as NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], based in Brussels, Belgium. From among these Filipinos, 56.4% are permanent residents, including those who have become naturalized Belgians and, soon after, dual citizens, Filipinos and Belgians. 40.3% are "temporary migrants" employed by diplomats with fixed periods as

falling within the clause of temporary residents. They came to Belgium through their respective diplomat-employers or friends and relatives already working in Belgium. The remaining 3.3%, the undocumented or irregular workers, take in *travailleur noir* or clandestine jobs with salaries way below the official.

Four thousand of these Filipinos live in Brussels (Gaspar, 2008). Of these 4,000 Filipinos in Brussels, 80% are Catholics. These Catholics may belong to associations sanctioned by Filipino Chaplaincy, like *Couples for Christ*, *Legion of Mary*, and *El Shaddai*. *El Shaddai* - discussed prominently in the later section of this paper - is a Filipino/a Catholic Charismatic Movement with numerous chapters in the Philippines and worldwide (Au, 2020). At the time of this research, the Filipino Catholic chaplaincy was situated within the *Commune Molenbeek*. In particular, it occupied the Church of *St Remi* in *Rue de l'Ourthe* and the huge center, a few steps away, where the Filipino chaplain resided and where the Filipinos gathered for training and small-group meetings.

In the Philippines, some Filipino scholars have taken up the Roman Catholic experience of Filipinos as disparate (Bulatao & Gorospe, 1966; Covar, 1993; Salazar & Guillermo, 2000) or compatible (Mercado, 1974; Miranda, 1989; Zialcita, 2005) with the Filipino psyche. Some have

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highlighted Roman Catholicism's contribution to ensuring individual freedom (Jocano, 1981), expanding the scope of mobility (Wiegele, 2004), strengthening social solidarity (Lynch, 1956), and guaranteeing social transformation within the Philippines (Alejo, 1990) and the greater Catholic world (De la Cruz, 2015). Other notable writings (Clema Iletto, 1979; Rafael, 1988; Bautista, 2010) have probed the missionary project of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines and the ambiguity of conversion among Filipinos. This ambiguity may be conditioned by the ineffective management of Catholic educational institutions (Bual & Madrigal, 2018) and the subjectivities of differentiated agents in the initial formation (Guazon, 2005).

In the transnational context, several scholars have rendered Roman Catholicism capable of recognizing and accommodating other belief systems (Klassen, 2005). Hence, Roman Catholicism is viewed as instrumental to the social bridging of Filipinos in Brussels, Belgium (Leman, 1999), relief and finding a job for Filipinos in Tokyo, Japan (Mateo, 2000), a sense of nostalgia among gay Filipinos in New York (Manalansan, 2002), ventilating political resistance for OFWs from Antique province of the Philippines (Cruz-Lucero, 2006).

The aforesaid authors may have varying degrees of interest in putting Roman Catholicism at the center of their ethnography. Nonetheless, they have shown that the practice of Roman Catholicism has taken various trajectories due to historically constituted cultural and social processes.

Robbins (2007 and 2014), a spearheader of the anthropology of Christianity, paid little (if did not at all pay attention) to the cultural and social processes, owing partly to his intent to delineate Christianity's logic as a basis to compare Christian-related ethnographies. This logic's leading features are radical rupture from the past, asceticism, individualism, and sincerity. Aside from the fact that his views resemble more the western protestant strand of Christianity, and so overlook other groups that form part of Christianity, like Roman Catholicism, it cannot capture particular ways in which Catholicism as *longue durée* institution is used to crisscross indigenous religion and respond to the sociopolitical tensions, internal and external to Catholicism. Nonetheless, these inadequacies serve as a springboard to an emerging field in the study of religion, labeled as the anthropology of Catholicism (Mayblin et al., 2017).

I feel this emerging anthropology of

Catholicism is more plausible to make sense of the Filipino Catholics in what Hann (2007) termed as a non-idealist traditional location, i.e., Brussels, Belgium. As shown in the succeeding sections, the Catholics: *firstly*, assign sacred meanings drawn from Roman Catholic textual sources and visions alongside their homegrown values; *secondly*, associate themselves with different religious groups, homeland and receiving ordinaries or official officers of the Roman Catholic church, like, the Catholic Bishops Conference in the Philippines and the Archdiocese of Brussels-Mechelen in Belgium; and, *finally*, establish an interpersonal relationship with, at times, opposing differently positioned laics, clerics and bishops to mediate their desire to found the Filipino Chaplaincy.

"Hypocrites!" I remember labeling the Filipino Catholic migrants in Brussels, Belgium, at the early stage of my encounter with them. As I observed them, they seemed to be very religious on the surface, typically involving themselves in activities that are in line with Roman Catholic teachings one day, manifested conducts unbecoming of Roman Catholic believers the next, and reconstituting their lives in the eyes of Roman Catholic principles and duties later. By reacting this way, I admit I am conditioned by my expectations, revelatory of my subjectivity as an anthropologist. This subjectivity also carries along my ideals and the evaluative frame that goes with these as a Roman Catholic brother affiliated with the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Hereafter would be referred to as CICM, the acronym for *Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae*, the institute's Latin name. CICM is a Roman Catholic male religious missionary institute of Belgian origin.

Later, I realized that these seeming ambiguities lie on the surface level. There is more to uncover in the seeming obscurities in the life of Filipino Catholic migrants in Brussels, Belgium. Hence, I wanted to make sense of these and unveil the conditions that breed them in the life of Filipino Catholic migrants in Brussels. This cannot simply be captured by Cannell's (2005) extending the definition of "real" Christian to "anyone who seriously so describes him or herself" as one and Robbins (2007) who may label Catholics as the non-ascetic, non-individualistic, and non-sincere cousins of protestant Christians.

2.0. Methodology

Apart from observation, this ethnographic study is supported by interviews and archival documents. Given my strategic location as a

participant observer in the Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels on two occasions - on a full-time basis from 2009 to 2010 and yearly visits lasting one month, from 2014 and 2015 - and, in the Philippines, during the yearly vacation of several Filipinos, from 2016-2020, I gained access to the experiences of Filipino Catholics differentiated in terms of their deeper struggle given their social position in Brussels.

Prior to the above-mentioned periods, however, I already lived in Belgium for five years, from 1997 to 2000 and from 2003 to 2005, where I had a work experience in its center, Brussels, and even worked at Missio-Belgium, a Catholic funding agency, which central office is in Brussels. I was already acquainted with the then Archdiocesan Commissioner in charge of the Filipino chaplaincy in Brussels. An added advantage was my opportunity, as a religious brother, to give "sermons" during masses and talks during retreats of the Filipino community in Brussels. Further, I was already familiar with where and when most of them converged. That is why I did not need to undergo the process of *entrée* to launch my research.

Between 2009 and 2015, I interviewed forty-four Filipino Catholics. From 2016 to 2020, I had casual conversations with several of them during their vacation in the Philippines. I carefully selected my interviewees based on their age, gender, residential status, and leadership positions in the Filipino community in Brussels, Belgium. During our conversations in my interviewee's actual setting, like their living quarters, work-station, restaurant, or houses in the Philippines, I exercised flexibility in conducting interviews. When the need arose, I rephrased my questions to sound religious so as not to offend my interviewees. For instance, I also allowed them to recount their life histories, especially the times and issues they deemed important. I paid attention to the religious meaning they attached to these events, the source of their derived religious meaning, and how they articulated it.

Calculatingly, this research only covers two decades of Filipino Catholic Chaplaincy's history - 1989 to 2009. Right at this moment, my interviewees are all documented, meaning, legally staying in Belgium. Hence, the publication of this research can no longer imperil their work and residency in Belgium. Their names are either withheld or hidden behind pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and those implicated in this research. The Filipino Catholics I talked to were informed about my research agenda

and had given their consent before collecting pertinent data. Several quotations in this study are taken from literal transcriptions of my interviews.

These interviews are backed up by archival documents (Guazon, 2016). Other than historical literature, the then vicar in charge of the foreign Catholics in Brussels had also furnished me with sufficient and significant documentary pieces of evidence for my study. The interviews make these documents not isolated from the larger socio-political structure. Meanwhile, the archival documents help understand the historical circumstances behind Filipino Catholics' projects and desire to create Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels, Belgium.

Catholicism, however, is a lived religion of what believing actors consider Sacred and Divine (Baigent et al., 2022). Hence, I feel it is imperative to dig deeper into the life-challenges Catholics encounter as they ascribe meaning to their being Catholics and live their lives along with other Catholics, lay, and clerics alike. These life challenges, as they appear in the succeeding successions, also include the social and cultural contouring of Catholicism and the axiomatic tensions between individual experiences and Catholic infrastructures and "official positions" that must be made and responded to in differing ways in the creation of Filipino Chaplaincy in diasporic context (Mayblin et al., 2017).

So, I resorted to micro-level ethnographic explorations of the mechanisms of Catholic institutions and the experiences of Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium. Catholic institution is rendered malleable as having a geopolitical center (Rome) yet operating at local, regional, and international levels. In the section "Localized Catholicism", I have demonstrated that Catholicism can also be stretched to accommodate local values, like *awa* (pity) and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), along with theological positions without breaking the Catholic institution. In "Embracing Roman Catholic Institution in Precarious Situations", a Catholic institution is rendered a "living ecology," referring to an alignment of "living signs" and the individual agents who populate them.

In the final section, "Circumscribing Interpersonal Mediation", Filipino Catholics' experience "involves practices, negotiations, and contestations with others with whom we (people) are connected" (Biehl et al., 2007, pp. 53-54). This means that the Filipino Catholics' experience embodies moral values that guide people's actions and interactions. These moral

values implicate Roman Catholicism. For Kleinman (2006), "moral" does not correlate "synonymously with good in an ethical sense". It points to "our sense of right or wrong" that is subject to, and/or in need of, "approbation from others," it pertains significantly to "the things that matter most to us (Pp. 1-3)."

Because there is much at stake for Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium, whether they are particularly personal or widely collective concerns, they experience more serious moral undertakings that bring to the fore deep values like independence, reliance, and commitments. That is why, as this study argues, the stakes of Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium made manifest in and revolves around Filipino Chaplaincy and the rituals it sanctions are particular. Yet, as these stakes are circumscribed within Roman Catholic institutions, Filipino Catholics are taking their share in objectifying Roman Catholicism's very structuring mechanisms. Through forming mediation chains, the Catholic church is shown to exercise tolerance of differences and discipline on dissent far exceeding individual intentionality.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Localized Catholicism

As this section demonstrates, Filipino Catholics' moral values are informed by Roman Catholicism and concomitant resources. These Filipinos have ways of ascribing meanings to their being Catholics in Brussels, Belgium. However, based on the aforesaid Filipino scholars who have looked into the Filipino experience of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, Filipino Catholics' interpretations of these moral values are socioculturally filtered and contoured.

Under the Roman Catholic idiom of "helping people from marginalized groups," stipulated in the Beatitudes, the church's doctrines, and the chaplaincy's mission statement, several Filipino organizations, helped set up the religious gatherings; a few Belgian priests and nuns provided venues for liturgies that Filipino priests, studying in the Katholiek Universiteit-Leuven, located in a city next to Brussels, presided over. Implicit in those religious gatherings, however, is a culturally constituted social arrangement within which there are *many hawaks* (sponsors) and their *alagas* (wards or clients) (Guazon, 2014).

Quite commonly, Filipinos call their work *kudkud*, which now describes their being confined to the domestic sector. Aware of this lowly status, the documented Filipino migrants in Brussels have resorted to a social arrangement

to uplift themselves in the eyes of the community and, to a certain extent, the Brussels regional government. Within this social arrangement, they take the role of *may hawaks* (patrons) who occupy higher positions over the *alagas* (wards or clients). This system of exchanges between individuals, the *may hawaks* (sponsor) and the *alagas* (wards), is connected to the patron-clientage model with *utang na loob* ("debt of gratitude" or "debt of inside") as a significant operational value (Guazon, 2014).

Take the case of *Samahan*, a non-governmental organization affiliated with international migrant organizations and the Philippine-based Migrant. *Samahan* has sponsored masses in the Centre Asiatique Oriens in Chaussée de Waterloo (Galicia, 2008). The superior of the Société des Auxiliaires des Missions, the congregation overseeing the compound, was permitted to use one of the halls of the center. *Samahan's* founding *may hawaks* are former activists and candidate priests in the Philippines. Three successive Filipino priest-scholars in Leuven from a diocese in the Philippines used to lead the Eucharistic celebration.

To establish that their intent to care for their *alagas* is based on Roman Catholic moral principles, however, the *may hawaks* highlight their motivation as akin to Jesus's sacrifices for the poor and the *kaawa-awa* (pitiful). Generally speaking, these *alagas* are either undocumented, partially documented with pending cases, and/or newly arrived in Belgium. Hence, to the Filipino Catholic *may hawaks*, the *alaga's* current status in Belgium signifies that God is tasking them to sacrifice for these people (Guazon, 2014).

The sacrifice here consists of religious motivation translated into a social act beyond personal comfort and family relation. This *sakripisyo*/suffering is reminiscent in the *pasyon* (Clemea Iletto, 1979) and novena (Schumacher, 1991), where Jesus is presented as sacrificing himself by being low and standing at and eating with the lowly to liberate them. However, in the case of *may hawaks-alagas*, this sacrifice/suffering is not without interest. Sacrifice/suffering here is a gift given by the *may hawaks* to their lowly *alagas*. In exchange, they would reap respect and, by doing a noble deed, earn God's recognition.

The *may hawaks* highlight sacrificing the privacy of their homes and time for the family just to render their services to the church and their *alagas*. These sacrifices are not easy, but they believe that what they are doing will eventually

bear fruits. According to Daria, a *may hawak*, "if there is Good Friday (Guazon, 2014).

While *sakripisyo* and *awa* may be imbued with Christian meaning, Filipinos interpret them according to their own understanding of social reciprocity and exchange (Clemea Ilet, 1979; Rafael, 1988; Cannell, 1999; 2006). Within this system of the transaction, *sakripisyo*, and *awa* are shaped and reconfigured both by the *alagas* and the *may hawaks*. The *may hawaks'* moral ascendancy hinges on the presence and dependence of the *alagas*. The *alagas*, however, have their share of interests, which make their allegiance to their *may hawaks* unstable and unpredictable. For instance, the *alagas* can use the same values of sacrifice and pity against their *may hawaks*, in case they become too abusive and controlling, hence, *walang awa* (without pity). Yet, morally laden gossip revolving around the absence of *utang na loob* debt of gratitude by the *alagas* to their *may hawaks* attempt to regulate the instability (see also endnote 5).

Also, as circumscribed by Filipinos in Brussels, the "poor" is understood as the poor *kababayans* instead of the more encompassing poor in the bible. By going beyond their strong self-family orientation that consists of their immediate *sakop* (social circle) (Andres et al., 1986; Mercado, 1974) just to care for the poor *kababayans*, Filipino *may hawaks* consider this moral precept, albeit confined mostly to fellow Filipino as Catholic (Guazon, 2014).

Since these Filipino Catholics in Brussels were divided into different groups under the leadership of their respective *may hawaks*, several Filipinos felt they were like the scattered seeds and the *tupang ligaw* (lost sheep) in the bible. To unify and maintain solidarity among Filipinos, like the Filipinos in Lynch's (1956) and Leman's (1999) research, Filipino Catholics in Brussels reaffirm their affiliation with the Roman Catholic hierarchy, at local and transnational levels, in Belgium and the Philippines.

Coinciding with the visit to Belgium of the former head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' (CBCP) Commission on Filipino Migrants in 1987, the Samahan leaders expressed the urgent need for a Filipino priest to work with the Filipino community in Belgium on a long-term basis. Coinciding with the visit to Belgium of the former head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' (CBCP) Commission on Filipino Migrants in 1987, the Samahan leaders expressed the urgent need for a Filipino priest to work with the Filipino community in Belgium on a long-term basis.

Realizing that their suggestion needed structural support within the local section of the Catholic Church in Brussels, the Samahan and other Filipino organizations based in Brussels sent a letter to the then Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Brussels-Mechelen, dated 4 June 1989. In so doing, they expressed their "fervent wish to have a Parish of their own." Based on this letter, what the Filipino leaders wanted was a parish and not a chaplaincy. Canonically, the latter is a Catholic category for a nonconventional ministry serving specific sectors such as prisoners, the elderly, mentally ill patients, and, in the case of the Filipino Catholics in Brussels, migrants (Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1983). One of the leading advocates at that time, however, admitted that the forerunners of the Filipino chaplaincy did not know the difference between the two. All they were after, he said, was to have a Filipino Church that could unite the Filipinos. By having a Church of their own, they could practice what they are accustomed to doing like "speaking their language, sharing their joys and sorrows, singing their songs and, most of all, worshipping together." To convince the cardinal, they reechoed their culturally constituted value of sacrifice, manifested by coming "such a long way away from home in order to help their families in the Philippines."

Embracing Roman Catholic Institution in Precarious Situations

The setting up of the Filipino Catholic chaplaincy is mediated by the sociopolitical conditions in Belgium and within the Filipino community. These Filipino Catholic migrants differ in their struggles within the social matrix of inequalities in Brussels and power differentials within the Filipino community. Under the historical circumstances when Filipino migrants' work and residency were imperiled in Belgium, Filipino Catholic migrants have strategically shifted allegiance to Filipino Chaplaincy and its affiliate groups. The reasons for this shift are: first, the Filipino Chaplaincy's malleable theology that captures the remaking of the parameters of the relation between sinners and saints, *may hawak* and *alaga*; second, its potent connection and influence to provide refuge and legal assistance.

In Belgium, the most significant among these shifting conditions was the *naissance* of the European Union (EU) in the 1990s, which paved the way for the dismantling of borders among member-states and the setting up of Brussels as the European Union's (EU) capital (Huysseune & Jans, 2008). This boosted the international

character of Brussels even more – being at the crossroad of the European continent's busiest highways and high-speed trains and hosting the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and international offices of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations (Corijn et al., 2009). This influx has generated employment for lobbying, consultancy, the media, an array of embassies, and regional delegations, as well as in the business and domestic labor sector, a milieu dominated by Filipinos and Polish.

Along with the changing character of Brussels as an international city, *un sentiment d'insécurité*, which began as a regional phenomenon in the 1960s and became stronger and widespread in the 1970s among Belgian nationals, intensified and has become even more evident. This is why, according to Deboosere et al. (2009), there is an increasing number of Belgians moving out of Brussels to settle in other regions in Belgium. For Vandezande et al. (2011), "foreigners" and "religious believers" are caught in this deep-seated sentiment and, as a result, put up with feelings of exclusion and discrimination.

With this as the backdrop, the Filipino Catholics began expressing their wish to have a chaplaincy of their own. The proof is their aforesaid letter to the then Cardinal dated 4 June 1989. Quite evidently, the purpose of having a chaplaincy is similar to Leman (1999), who sees the Filipino chaplaincy in Belgium as a space for Filipinos to practice their long-held habits as a strategy to withstand the loneliness of being in a foreign land; Mateo (2000) who observes how the Filipino church in Japan has become a venue to find a job; and Guazon (2014) who views the Filipino chaplaincy in Brussels as a safe haven for the undocumented, albeit temporary.

As a response, however, the then Vicar of Brussels and Mechelen, the designated authority of the then Cardinal to handle the affair of the Filipino migrants in Brussels, was cautious in speeding up the creation of Filipino Chaplaincy. For, as expressed in his letter to the then Bishop in charge of the CBCP Commission on Filipino migrants, dated 4 July 1993, this "might be misconstrued by the civil authorities who tend to believe that the Church encourages illicit immigration."

The Filipino Catholics did not waiver in their want to have a chaplaincy in Brussels. This is why the discussions on Filipino chaplaincy took off again in 1995. While the setting up of the Filipino chaplaincy was still in the planning stage, the then Vicar was surprised to hear that the Filipino Community, led by the very people who

attended the meetings meant to initially discuss the creation of the Filipino chaplaincy, was already holding masses in the Carmelite Church of the Trinity in Toison d'Or. So, he just informed the Cardinal about the incident. The Cardinal, on the other, could not help but allow the Filipinos to have their own chaplaincy in Brussels.

Nonetheless, the Filipino Catholics' take on the Filipino chaplaincy and commitment to religious activities it organizes, and sanctions intensifies as one changes his or her residential status. For those with undocumented status or unstable residency, rituals of testimonies and sharings attended by Filipinos and sanctioned by Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels are occasions that endow religious significance to their experience in an environment hostile to migrants.

During Sunday gatherings of the El Shaddai, Filipino Catholic members define God as their identity vis-à-vis the Belgian-issued identity card. In one of the gatherings I attended, one narrated how God had kept them off from being meted God's *oras* (time), referring to their hour of death or deportation. Thus, their fellows know who is illegally staying in Belgium. As in the cases of Carlo and Mary Grace, this repeated public disclosure is backed up by the religious rhetoric of sacrificing for the impoverished family back in the Philippines. Even as their families in the Philippines squander their money, they keep on sending them financial support. In this way, Rappaport's (1999), as cited in Robbins (2007), understanding of rituals as intended to publicly end one's agency in favor of a more powerful God and attendant social obligations is deflected. Through these rituals, Filipino Catholics testify about God's power but only to publicly clarify for others – God and co-members - who hear the testimonies of their obligations. God has to delay his looming *oras* by way of sparing them from deportation; their fellow Filipino Catholics should fear God's power of reprisal, especially on those without pity and compassion, so these fellows should not tip the undocumented off to authorities.

For those with stable residential cards, the community organizes travels outside Belgium to visit pilgrimage sites where pilgrims buy sacred images to be brought home and prominently display on their altar to mark out the expansion of their religious space as a result of doing what is morally acceptable, for instance, working hard for the family. Thus, it can be said that the setting up of the Filipino chaplaincy in Brussels is mutually beneficial to the Church institution, represented by its leaders and the Filipino

community, consisting of the undocumented and the documented.

Depending on the sociopolitical circumstances, undocumented workers can be legalized via state amnesty to illegal migrants. An example is the state amnesty (regularization) for undocumented workers in 2000. In the absence of amnesty, however, non-Belgians without legal residential status received financial help from the public social welfare center, Centres Publics d'Action Sociale/Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn or CPAS/OCMW (Belgium, be, 2022). Their churches also receive state subsidies through financial assistance to care for the church buildings, salaries, and pensions of religious ministers or organization leaders from government revenues (International Religious Freedom Report, 2015).

Given this opportunity for the undocumented workers to be legalized, later on, loyalty to their *may hawak* became even more volatile. Since this can drive them to leave their *may hawak* to be *may hawak* themselves. Applying Biehl et al. (2007), this proves that remaking the parameters of the relation between the indebted and debtors is relative to the changing sociopolitical circumstances where they are embedded.

Take, for instance, what happened to a charismatic group founded in the Philippines, which was sponsoring a mass at the Paroisse Notre Dame de Stockel in Rue Vandermaelen/Vandermaelenstraat. A certain *alaga*, tasked to contact Filipino priests in Leuven to officiate the mass of the group in Brussels, became popular in the group because of his acquired connections. He was then suspected of overstepping the leaders' role in the organization. Unable to withstand this utter mistrust, he, together with his sympathizers, left the charismatic organization. He would later be one of the forerunners of the Filipino chaplaincy and, hence, a *may hawak*.

When internal disputes ensued in the charismatic organization Paroisse Notre Dame de Stockel, the group split again into two. One group transferred to the church of Saint Nicholas/Sint Niklaas in Bourse for their rituals and gatherings, with a new set of *may hawaks*, supported by a Belgian Jesuit Priest. Having received official recognition from the mother organization based in the Philippines, the group in Bourse was authorized to carry the name of the official name of the organization. To advance further its influence and, correspondingly, attract more *alagas*, it even linked up with the Philippine Embassy-initiated umbrella council. The other faction held their religious gatherings

in the Centre Saint Raphael in the Quartier Saint Guidon/Sint Guidowijk, under the approval of the founding *may hawaks* of the charismatic cluster in Brussels, with the help of a Belgian diocesan priest.

Thus far, as perceived by Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium, intrinsic in the Roman Catholic system is the maintenance of believers who can feel comfortable belonging to the church, for it provides a broad spectrum for transgression and redemption, regardless of their social standing in diaspora. Such spectrum also has territories under specific clerics who, to a certain extent, can work independently.

Roman Catholicism makes its believers feel that notwithstanding their acts of sin against the state (by being undocumented), their God is a forgiving God, hence, opening doors for redemption; at the same time, those who are morally upright (by working hard for the family in the Philippines), their God guarantees them of rewards or blessings. Recall Jocano (1981, p. 20), who cited that this is the same reason why Protestant "born-again" Christians returned to Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism, in the thinking of these Christians, bestows on its believers a degree of agency and, at the same time, submission. Hence, I argue that the seeming paradox in the Filipino migrant's practice of Roman Catholicism in Brussels, Belgium, is not so much about "split-level Christianity," as espoused by Bulatao and Gorospe (1966), but that such behavior stems from the broad spectrum of Roman Catholicism's tenets that can provide contextual framing of malleable moral experiences in a diasporic context.

As a result of the leeway given especially to undocumented workers, reactionary regional parties in Belgium, relying mainly on the bifurcation of the population into "us" and "them" as their slogan, emerged. The most famous of these parties is the Vlaams Blok which has "developed a siege mentality, having convinced their members that their wealth and/or culture are under threat from the Francophone Wallony and various groups of foreigners" (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005, p. 398).

According to Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005), this mentality resulted in a reluctance to hire non-Belgian workers. As expressed on the Philippine Embassy website, the Office National de l'Emploi (ONEM) under the respective Ministries of Labor of Belgium and Luxembourg does not easily issue work permits to non-Belgians since there is a considerable demand for domestic workers. This fear, according to

hides and, at times, deflects cleavages that, by far, reach the national level.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) continued, federal policy stressed the need for migrants to undergo an inburgeringsprocess or integration. This means that they have to relegate certain aspects of their culture, like the practice of religion, to the private sphere and publicly conform to Belgian norms. Although this rule specially targeted Muslims, it was nonetheless applied to all foreigners, including Filipinos.

When Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) renamed the party to Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interests) and repackaged itself akin to the American Republican Party in 2004, after it was adjudged as racist, the party attracted many voters from rural areas and major cities like Antwerp and Brussels. As a result, according to Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005), it has become the largest party in Belgium. This increased public sympathy towards the party's advocacy has pressured the government to pass strict laws curbing migration in Belgium.

At this time, however, the Filipino chaplaincy was enjoying an increasing number of churchgoers. This prominence began in 2000 when the state declared amnesty (regularization) for undocumented workers. The then chaplain collaborated with Filipino and Belgian organizations to form a confederation of Filipino religious and civic groups to help fellow Filipinos in Brussels. On the Belgian level, he sought the help of various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to give lectures on regularization, held on several Sundays, and help facilitate the application of undocumented and diplomat-sponsored Filipino workers in Brussels for legal residence. Also, he, in the name of the Filipino chaplaincy in Brussels, took the task of attesting to the Filipino applicants' claim of meeting the required number of years of stay in Belgium. This was shunned by the Philippine Embassy in Brussels so as not to give the impression that it was cuddling illegal aliens all along. Aside from this, the Filipino chaplaincy was also serving as a venue for translating documents, educating Filipino migrants regarding their legal rights, and for collecting donations for Philippine-based projects. Due to this gesture and influence, a number of Filipinos switched allegiance and loyalty to the Filipino chaplaincy and its chaplain, almost sidelining and overstepping the already-existing Filipino groups and their respective *may hawaks* at this moment.

Circumscribing Interpersonal Mediation

Filipino chaplaincy is also subject to mediation by interpersonal relations – among priests, differentiated by positions and nationalities, and lay people, that regulates people's appropriation and apprehension of vision, official positions, and transnational character of Catholic organizations, rendering moral practice as malleable. It was Biehl et al. (2007) who ascertained that moral experience involves "negotiations and contestations with others with whom we (people) are connected." I feel this is apt to make sense of the moral judgments, which is not always easy and predictably smooth sailing among Filipino Catholics in Brussels.

Take the case of a couple of Philippine-founded Catholic organizations with autonomous rights that formed local chapters during the short stint of Fr. Magnus and Fr. Aaron as heads of the Filipino Chaplaincy in Brussels. Fr. Magnus helped establish the El Shaddai Community in Brussels; Fr. Aaron, the Couples for Christ. In so doing, they gained strong followers who remained loyal to them even when another chaplain had already replaced them. Kasi nga, as one priest figured it, *mga katulong 'yan na kapag ginawa mong star, pati kamay nila ipapakain sa 'yo* (it is because they are all househelpers who, by your effort to make them celebrities, will even give you their hands).

When Father Aaron became the head of the chaplaincy and the organizations under it, he barred Fr. Magnus, who stayed in Belgium even after he was removed as chaplain, from conducting religious services to Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium. He also replaced El Shaddai's council members, who were identified with Fr. Magnus. This was supported by the then Vicar in charge of Catholic migrants in Brussels.

During the Sunday mass of 21 June 1998, the then Vicar appealed to the Filipino Catholics to respect the decision of the Archdiocese of Brussels-Malines by "avoiding every request for pastoral services from Fr. Magnus so that he can respect this decision in total loyalty and give all his time to his studies." He called for the Filipino community's continued "good work on behalf of those in need and close collaboration with your (their) Chaplaincy." Even though barred by the chaplaincy, Fr. Magnus was not deterred from conducting religious services for El Shaddai in other parishes not connected with the Filipino chaplaincy but within the Archdiocese of Brussels-Malines. This is because Catholic Church rule grants a certain degree of autonomy on the parish level.

During the initial days of Fr. Dodong, the one who replaced Fr. Aaron, as Filipino chaplain, the El Shaddai made moves to win Fr. Dodong's approval and recognition by holding their services again in the Filipino chaplaincy. Moreover, they gave Fr. Dodong the authority to appoint new council members. However, those who were disappointed with his choices created a splinter El Shaddai group (El Shaddai Holy Trinity) and decided to hold their services in the house of their members instead.

At this time, Jena, one of the El Shaddai splinter group's leaders who was disappointed with Fr. Dodong's choice, saw a vision that attested to her and her splinter group's struggle. In this vision, she saw herself fighting instead of giving in. Soon after, she dreamed of burning ruins. According to her, this symbolizes her community. Luckily, however, there were golden people left in the rubble. They, for Jena, are the few committed individuals who try to rebuild their group. The Mama Mary she dreamt of is the statue in the Church of Trinity, where they used to hold their prayer meetings. The image renders Mary stepping on a snake, representing the former head of Filipino Chaplaincy who made life difficult for her by undermining her leadership. This is clear proof, hence, that even as visions of Filipino Catholics have religious dimensions, they are shaped and conditioned by interpersonal relations.

Eventually, however, Jena and her El Shaddai splinter group found a Belgian priest that allowed them to hold their services in his parish. Under the church's principle of subsidiarity, it is possible to hold one's religious services in any parish as long as the parish priest allows it. The El Shaddai splinter group also found an ally in a priest-scholar in Leuven who willingly officiated the mass on a regular basis prior to their *gawain* (religious worship and fellowship).

Fr. Dodong wanted to regulate the splinter group's movements, citing this time the letter of the Archdiocese of Brussels-Malines on 21 June 1998 reminding the Filipino priest-scholars in Leuven, on the one hand, and Filipino organizations, on the other, to respect the mandate of the Filipino chaplaincy to officiate the religious needs of the Filipino Catholics in Brussels.

To ensure the permanency of the group as the duly recognized El Shaddai chapter in Brussels, the splinter group used the international character of El Shaddai by writing to the El Shaddai international secretariat office based in the Philippines to be recognized as the

official branch of El Shaddai in Brussels, Belgium. Initially, seeing the conflict between the two factions of El Shaddai in the chaplaincy and the splinter group, the El Shaddai international secretariat sought reconciliation of both. When this failed, the El Shaddai international secretariat chose the splinter group as the official group in Brussels.

Upon realizing this, the El Shaddai group under the chaplaincy sought approval and recognition from the Bishop of Brussels. The vicar not only acceded to their request but also wrote a letter on 2 May 2006. In the said letter, the then Vicar expressed his appreciation of several movements that keep on enriching the entire community. However, he wrote the members of the Filipino community in Brussels to "be aware that there is only one Filipino community with one priest-in-charge." He went on to say, "every believer can participate in the Sunday mass in the community he/she chooses: in English, in French, in Dutch." "But," he declared, "when people want to celebrate as a Filipino community, it should take place at the chaplaincy or at any group which has a link with the Chaplaincy and the priest-in-charge of the chaplaincy." As regards liturgical celebrations of a movement, he said, "members can have their own mass for known and accepted reasons, but this should not be the rule since the movement is an integral part of the Chaplaincy." Further, he advised members of movements to participate regularly in the chaplaincy celebrations in union with their Filipino brothers and sisters.

Because of the principle of subsidiarity, however, this letter was not fully implemented. The El Shaddai, under the Filipino chaplaincy, remained adamant and wanted the then Vicars declaration enforced. They wanted the Vicar to make clear his stand. Whom will he recognize: the El Shaddai-Saint Remy, which is supported by the chaplaincy, or the splinter El Shaddai-Holy Trinity?

Until his retirement in 2008, however, the then Vicar did not give a direct reply. He only said, "You cannot say. Like the Belgian situation, you cannot say, you have to go to your local parish." For him, *ledere gelovige heeft zeker een nood. En kan in die parochie zijn echte spirituele nood beleven niet alleen de questie van hoe ik in die parochie krijg ik wat ik nodig heb, maar ook wat ik geef in die gemeenschap* (Every believer has a particular need. And in this parish, every believer can fill his/her spiritual needs. The issue is not only what I need but also what I can give for the community). He added, *Ik laat het aan de wijsheid*

van de priester over, echt, in eer en geweten, te maken, wat nu echt is, the way to do (I leave it to the wisdom of the priest, in truth and honesty, to decide). And so he let Fr. Dodong and his successor, Fr. Elmo, decide on matters revolving around El Shaddai in Brussels. In the same way, he gave the priest-head of the Holy Trinity the prerogative to give permission to a faction of El Shaddai to celebrate mass in his parish. For, in the vicar's thinking, it was the openness and hospitality of the said priest-head to the poor that drove him to accommodate the Filipinos, even though he knew this would complicate the eenwording (the becoming one) of the Filipino community in Brussels. Further, he reasoned, Als er twee groepen zijn (If there are two groups), it is a fact: You cannot cancel one and promote the other." He went on to say, *Wat groeit groeit. Je kan proberen te weten, of het echt van de geest is of een, splitsing on andere redens die niet positief zijn, Maar als het echt van de geest is, onderzoek het, als het goed is laat het gebeuren* (What grows grow. You can try to assess if it is from the spirit or from anything that is not positive. But if it is from the spirit, look into it, if it is good, make it happen). Up to this day, the two groups exist within the same archdiocese.

4.0. Conclusion

Lest this study falls into the trap of dualism in ethnographic analysis, i.e., Roman Catholic institution and its expressive forms vis-à-vis Filipino morality, what I did was uncover other areas influencing the subjects' moral values as Filipino Catholics. Based on my findings, I propose that anthropological studies on Roman Catholicism should go beyond delineating Catholicism's logic and probe deeper into other areas of the Filipino migrant's sociomoral world.

By returning to moral values that interpret Roman Catholic scriptural idioms, doctrines, material objects, and rituals, it may seem that Roman Catholicism's ordering system persists, finds legitimacy, and, as a result, thrives. When one looks deeper into this ordering system, one may unveil the sociopolitical circumstances and the interpersonal connection that conditions the ways Roman Catholics, particularly Filipino Catholics, engage their being one. Seen in this light, one can understand better the purview of the influence of Roman Catholicism in the moral lives of Filipino Catholics in Brussels, Belgium. This renders my ethnographic analysis truly attentive to moments of indeterminacy and instability of diasporic experience in cultural analysis.

The study admits that there is still much to

learn from the Filipino Catholic Chaplaincy in Brussels now that it has relocated to a new site in the commune of Forest and has a growing number of documented and retired/retiring members. If future research projects will dig deeper into Catholicism as a "lived religion" in Asia and, in particular, the Philippines, they will open new interesting but not exclusive insights into the workings of Catholicism's material culture and institutional rigidity and flexibility. By and large, this may contribute to discourses on religion in modern times beyond the functionalist and colonialist model.

6.0. Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The researcher declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article

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