

Dr Nativity Petallar is Assistant Professor of Christian Education at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS) located in the Philippines. She also teaches and directs the Holistic Child Development Program at the seminary. She is also Christian Education Director of Kamuning Free Methodist Church and engages with various ministries with children in the church and community. Prior to teaching at APNTS, Nativity has worked at PH-611 Sunbeam Child Development Center, a project of Compassion International for seven years in the southern part of the Philippines. Email: [npetallar@apnts.edu.ph](mailto:npetallar@apnts.edu.ph).

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## **Emerging Themes of Child Theology and The Context of Filipino Children**

Nativity A. Petallar

The heart of God beats for the welfare of children. Children are part of His atoning work. They are a part of the divine mission. When Jesus was here on earth with His disciples, He placed a child in their midst to illustrate to them kingdom values (Matthew 18:1-6). This “child-in-the-midst” concept is the very heart of Child Theology. Keith White and Haddon Willmer, two of the leading proponents of Child Theology cite that “Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of Theology: historical, biblical, and systematic in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples.<sup>1</sup> It is a way of looking at Scriptures with the child at the forefront of our reflection. This process determines the way we do ministry in various contexts. Just as Liberation Theology and African, Asian, and feminist theologies have changed our paradigms, so Child Theology has the potential to cause a

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<sup>1</sup>Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology* (United Kingdom: The Child Theology Movement Limited, 2006) 4. As a working definition, Keith White, founder and chair of the Child Theology Movement writes, “Child Theology is a process of theological reflection starting with the question: “What does it mean for us today to respond to the teaching and example of Jesus when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples so that they could be encouraged to change and become lowly like little children in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven?” Keith J. White, *Introducing Child Theology: Theological Foundations for Holistic Child Development* (Penang, Malaysia: Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Compassion International, and the Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development, 2010), 8.

fundamental ground-shift in the way our generation—and perhaps future generations—understands the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Sunny Tan, Director of the Child Theology Movement expounds on this concept in this manner:

When the term “Child Theology” is mentioned, most listeners immediately think of children. Some hear the term as referring to theology of/by children. Child Theology has to do with children but it is first of all “Theology” proper—that is, the field of study with G-O-D as the main subject. Child Theology is an aspect of Christian Theology and seeks to contribute towards Christian thinking and speaking on God and His ways. As Theology, it is also about a way of doing theology and recommends approaches to theological reflection.<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to draw implications of the premise of Child Theology to the context and ministries done with Filipino children. This paper uses the definition of the word, “child” as stipulated in the Family Code of the Philippines. A child is anyone who is physically, mentally and emotionally disadvantaged and is dependent on others to survive. This description is pretty inclusive. It includes those who might be 19 years old and above but cannot care for themselves and depend on others for their welfare. The churches in the Philippines are already engaged in the care and welfare of children, however, there are hurdles that the church needs to overcome before it can provide a holistic ministry with children in the light of theological reflection.

### **The Religious Context of the Philippines**

The Philippines is unique as the largest Christian country in Asia with over 89% of the population as Christians. Religion plays a very important role in the life of Filipinos. For some

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<sup>2</sup>Dan Brewster, “It’s Time to Open the 4/14 Window,” in *Emerging Missions Movements: Voices of Asia*, ed. Bambang Budijanto (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International and Asia Evangelical Alliance, 2010), 27.

<sup>3</sup>Sunny Tan, *Child Theology for the Churches in Asia: An Invitation* (United Kingdom: The Child Theology Movement Limited, 2007), 4.

Filipinos, their religion defines who they are and who they will be. Despite this seemingly deeply religious milieu, there are sobering questions that needed to be asked about the current situation of the children in the country. Questions like: why are there so many children who are suffering from abuse, poverty, trafficking, and other problems? Why are there so many children begging in the streets? Why are there many child laborers? Why are there many Filipino children prostitutes? Why is there a gap between the country's "religiosity" and the real context of Filipino children? What is the Christian response to this grave situation of children in the country?

There is freedom of religion in the country. With the presence of the 89% who are Christians in the Philippines, 81-85% is Roman Catholic.<sup>4</sup> There are well-meaning Roman Catholics. However, a majority of Filipinos who claim they are Roman Catholics have no part of the church whatsoever. This is part of the reason why the true essence of Christianity that the Philippines takes pride on is non-distinguishable on a large scale.

Reflecting on Filipino religiosity, Father Shay Cullen, an Irish missionary priest who was nominated three times for the Nobel Prize and other Human Rights awards for his work in the country since 1969 writes:

The Philippines was already a catholic country converted by the Spanish who occupied the Islands for many hundreds of years. So why was it necessary for missionaries to go there and what more needed to be done? Well, as I discovered there was the established Catholic Church and people went to church on Sunday for Mass and participated in the rituals, devotions, pilgrimages and processions but this did not mean that the gospel was being lived out as Jesus Christ preached it. If He came to visit the people there he would not be happy, he would cry out and weep over the cities and he would say again, as he did to his apostles and followers "I have been with you a long time and still you do not understand my message."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_the\\_Philippines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_the_Philippines); accessed 27 August 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Father Shay Cullen, "Fair-Trade Fights for Justice and Freedom," Preda Foundation Inc. News Articles online, September 22, 2010; available from <http://www.preda.org/main/archives/2010/r10092201.html>; accessed 28 September 2010.

Father Shay's observation of the religious life of Filipinos is astute but valid. Despite the fact that the Philippines is a so-called Christian country, a majority of these Christians are only "Christians" in name. This is one of the reasons why there is a disparity between the atrocities that are happening in the country and the seemingly "religious" façade. Among devoted Roman Catholic homes, there is usually a shrine or a grotto. Most Filipinos consider this as the "altar," sort of a symbol on prayer or the presence of God in that household. The shrine may simply consist of a candle and a colored lithograph of a favourite saint or the Crucifixion, or it may be quite elaborate—one or more wood or plaster Virgins and saints arranged on a table with two or three lithographs hanging above them.<sup>6</sup>

Many Roman Catholics still believe in spirits that inhabit the physical world. When the Spaniards came to the Philippines they found that the inhabitants already had a religion, a set of beliefs in spirits and other living things in the physical world. Writing about the supernatural beings that many Filipinos believe in, F. Landa Jocano observes:

These deities inhabited the surrounding world of our ancestors and maintained continued social interaction with them. Aside from this social relationship, these supernatural beings controlled all phenomena basic to man's [sic] survival—weather, diseases, success of crops, and so forth—such that every phase of daily activity had to follow the wishes of these controlling powers.<sup>7</sup>

Children in the country, especially those in the rural areas are still thinking that there are evil spirits that lurk behind the "balete" tree. Parents usually tell the children that the evil forces dwell in the dark so children are almost always afraid of the dark. Children believe in "aswang"

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<sup>6</sup>William F. Nydegger and Corinne Nydegger, "Tarong: An Ilocos Barrio in the Philippines," in *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing*, ed. Beatrice B. Whiting (London: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1963), 716.

<sup>7</sup>F. Landa Jocano, "Philippine Mythology and General Education," in *Anthropology for Non-Anthropologists*, ed. Zamora and Lawless (Quezon City: University of the Philippines College of Arts and Sciences, 1967), 144.

or witches.<sup>8</sup> Sunday school teachers would do well if they could explain concretely the concept of Jesus as the Shepherd in the light of the religious belief of most Filipino rural children.

### **The Socio-Economic Context of the Philippines**

The Philippines is rich with natural resources. It is mostly an agricultural country. However, one of the fastest-growing trends in the country is urbanization. With this is the migration of people from the provinces to the cities, leaving their farm lands for the lure of city life. Corollary to this migration is unemployment, underemployment, human trafficking and the like. Migration to urban contexts is one of the reasons why despite the agricultural richness of the country, the Philippines had to import rice from other Asian countries. Manila, the capital city is now overpopulated. Squatters are rampant in the urban settings sometimes leaving the actual owners of the property at their mercy. Children of these squatters suffer terribly for obvious reasons: non-hygienic surroundings, dying of preventable diseases, and poverty among many others.

Children constitute almost half of the Philippine population.<sup>9</sup> In 1988 children composed about 49.74 per cent of the population. The researchers of the University of the Philippines write

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<sup>8</sup>The writer of this paper believes in “aswang” as a child. The “aswang” is a very famous scary word among children’s conversations especially in the rural areas where there is no electricity yet. Maximo Ramos writes that the “aswang” concept is most usefully understood as a congeries of beliefs about types of mythical beings identifiable with certain creatures of the European tradition: the blood-sucking vampire, the man-eating weredog, and the vindictive evil-eye witch among others (Maximo Ramos, *The Aswang Synchasy in Philippine Folklore*[Philippines: Philippine Folklore Society, 1971], 2); cited in Fernando G. Elusterio, *Essays on Philippine Religious Culture*, monograph series no. 7 (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1989). 16.

<sup>9</sup>Perla D. Ocampo, et al., *The Filipino Child: A Health Situationer* (Diliman, Quezon City: The Center for Integrative and Development Studies University of the Philippines, 1994), 1.

that children are the most vulnerable sector in the country.<sup>10</sup> The Philippine Government declared that almost half of all Filipino people lived below the poverty line level, and the Philippines ranked seventh among countries having the highest poverty rates in the world.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this is one of the major causes of the suffering of many children in the country.

There is much hunger among Filipino children. Lynn M. Kwiatkowski conducted an analysis on hunger in the Philippines. One of the findings of her study was: hunger and the high rate of malnutrition within the Filipino population has been the embodiment of historically developed international and national social power imbalances and inequality.<sup>12</sup> One of the major challenges of the Noynoy Aquino administration is the increasing debt of the Philippines each year. Children who are not yet born are already indebted to international credit institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The *Operation World* documents that the public debt of the country is 29% of its Gross National Product.<sup>13</sup>

For most Filipinos, children are a gift of God and a sign of grace. The assumption of Jesudason Baskra Jeyaraj that “children are loved and valued in all societies” is true in the Philippines.<sup>14</sup> In the Philippines, children are valued for the happiness and inspiration they bring. This concept is one of the reasons why the country is overpopulated. The government launches population control measures but majority of families do not care. Most people hope that better

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Health Action Information Network, “Current National News: New Minimum Daily Wage,” *Health Alert* (January 1994), 7.

<sup>12</sup>Lynn M. Kwiatkowski, *Struggling with Development: The Politics of Hunger and Gender in the Philippines* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>13</sup>*Operation World Asia*; available from <http://www.operationworld.org/country/phil/owtext.html>; accessed 28 September 10.

<sup>14</sup>Jesudason Baskra Jeyaraj, “Biblical Perspectives on Children and their Protection,” in *Children at Risk: Issues and Challenges* (Bangalore: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2009), 1.

education will lead to declining birth rates. *Pocket Asia: Profiles, Facts, and Figures about Asia Today* reveals that the Philippine population is growing.<sup>15</sup> The National Statistics Coordination Board lists 88,574,614 as the population in the Philippines in the 2007.<sup>16</sup> This year, the Filipino population is 91,983,000. This many people with very few job opportunities is a problem.<sup>17</sup> Along this line, John Andrews documents, “The evidence is that when women become literate they have fewer children. But better education cannot come without economic development.”<sup>18</sup> Economic development is essential to a rapid growing population like that of the Philippines.

In many families in the country, children are valued for their economic contribution and security to their parents in old age. Parents exert all efforts to give their children the best education, attention and care and in return children are expected to take care of their parents in their old age. This is in harmony with the Scriptures’ injunction to “Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old,” (Proverbs 23:22, KJV).

Along this vein, the Philippine government highly values children. The Philippines is one of the signatories of the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC). In addition, the government endorses laws for the protection of children. The following are some of the laws enacted for the welfare and protection of children:

Article XV of the Philippine Constitution, Section 3 defending the right of children to assistance, care and nutrition; The Child & Youth Welfare Code of 1974 (PD 603); Executive Order 310 or the implementation of the Philippine National Strategic Framework for Plan Development for Children 2000-2025 or CHILD 21; The Family

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<sup>15</sup>John Andrews, *Pocket Asia: Profiles, Facts, and Figures about Asia Today*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Prifile Books Ltd., 1998), 8.

<sup>16</sup>Available from [http://www.nscb.gov.ph/secstat/d\\_popn.asp](http://www.nscb.gov.ph/secstat/d_popn.asp); accessed 24 Sep. 2010.

<sup>17</sup>“Population of the Philippines,; available from [http://www.trueknowledge.com/q/population\\_of\\_philippines\\_in\\_2010](http://www.trueknowledge.com/q/population_of_philippines_in_2010); accessed 24 September 2010.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

Code of 1988; Republic Act 8296 declaring the second Sunday of December as National Children's Day of Broadcasting; The Children's Television Act of 1997 (RA 8370); and the Proclamation No. 326 of 1994 declared as national policy the free registration of births, deaths, marriages, and foundlings.<sup>19</sup>

The Bible challenges Christians to speak and act in behalf of children: "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked," (Psalm 82:3-4). In the light of Child Theology, let us take a closer look at this Scripture verse and understand this verse with the issue on children in the Philippines. This verse is engaging us to be both in the offensive and defensive side of advocating for the rights of children and the oppressed. In the offensive side, the verse tells us to "rescue" and to "deliver." On the defensive side, the verse encourages us to "defend," and to "maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed." On the one hand, the verse assumes that atrocities are existent. On the other hand, it engages God's people to counteract violence, to bring healing, to bring deliverance. The Psalmist is mustering God's people to battle, to fight, to be on God's side in the ministry of deliverance.

### **The State of Filipino Children**

Being a democratic republic, citizens of the Philippines have varying degrees of freedom for self-improvement. The following is an attempt to paint the landscape of how children in the Philippines look like.

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<sup>19</sup>Presentation during the "Understanding God's Heart for Children" Seminar, Butuan City, November 10, 2009.

## Children of the Rich

The disparity between the rich and the poor is pretty obvious. Children who come from rich families, though living in luxury also are risk. Dan Brewster writes, “All children are at risk.”<sup>20</sup> Children of the rich in the country have “big spending power” and are “text savvy.” The Cartoon Network conducted a survey in November 2003 in Metro Manila and Cebu and Davao cities.<sup>21</sup> They studied 1,000 children aged 7 to 14 as well as their parents. The title of the survey was “New Generations Philippines 2004.” The survey indicated that 96 per cent of parents give their children an average of P109 in pocket money every week. Children in Metro Manila receive an average of P140 per week, with seven to eight year olds receiving P99 and teenagers given as much as P218 for pocket money.<sup>22</sup> The survey found that children are becoming increasingly familiar with mobile phones. Sixty-six per cent of respondents claim to have used a mobile phone and 77 per cent of them send text messages at least once a week. Most (73 per cent) of the respondents favor Nokia over other mobile phone brands. In the Philippines today, even poor families have at least one cell phone in the house.

## Filipino TV Kids are Poor Listeners

Modern-Day Pinoy Kids are poor listeners due to frequent television watching. A literacy test was conducted recently on selected Grade 1 pupils in Metro Manila. The study “showed poor ‘phonological awareness’ skills, or the ability to associate letters, words and pictures with their

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<sup>20</sup>Dan Brewster, *Child, Church and Mission* (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Pinoy Kids: Big Spending Power, Text Savvy,” *Philippine Star*, 23 March 2004.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

sound. Listening is the building block of reading, according to educators.”<sup>23</sup> This is now one of the major challenges of the Department of Education. Pado who is from the University of the Philippines comments, “We have media babies. They’re used to viewing. So our pupils have poor listening skills. That’s a global problem.”<sup>24</sup> The Department of Education estimates that up to four out of 10 pupils finish Grade 1 without knowing how to read.<sup>25</sup>

### Children of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

Children of OFWs are at risk. The number of Filipino workers is approaching 10 million, the bulk of whom are found in North America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>26</sup> This means that children of these parents are growing up with their relatives. Some of these children have a lot of psychological problems and developmental issues in their lives. The Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) migration may look good for the country because of the economic benefit it gives to the country. However, some researchers claim that almost 80% of OFWs have had to pay the price of marital break-ups and juvenile delinquencies.<sup>27</sup> It is also interesting to note that most of these OFWs are women, so, this means that many children suffer from the absence of their mothers.

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<sup>23</sup>Blanche S. Rivera, “TV Kids Are Poor Listeners,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 23 2004.

<sup>24</sup>Rivera, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Reyanaldo S. Taniajura, “Incidental Missions and the Overseas Filipino Workers Phenomenon,” in *Emerging Missions Movements: Voices of Asia*, ed. Bambang Budijanto (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International and Asia Evangelical Alliance, 2010), 56.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 57.

Melanie P. Ramos of the Institute on Church and Social Issues in the country writes about the presentation of Lina Laigo, Council for the Welfare of Children Director regarding the State of the Filipino Children Report of 2002 to former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.<sup>28</sup> The report is about the gains of the government in promoting the welfare and protecting the rights of young people towards the realization of the Philippine National Strategic Framework for Children or Child 21 in order to build a strong republic. This document, called Child 21 is a framework for planning programs and interventions that promote and safeguard the rights of Filipino children. Among many others, part of the report is on Child Protection. The report found out that the government needs to do more on this specific area.

### Child Protection Issues in the Philippines

In the said report, there are three specific issues on children in the Philippines being at risk. The report contains the following:

For one, the number of street children in major cities in the country is burgeoning. A UNICEF-commissioned study conducted by the De La Salle University Social Development Research Center (2000) showed that there are presently over 44,000 street children in the country today, of which 80 percent are boys. Most of them are out-of-school youths and migrants from rural areas. Their ages range from one to 14 years old; most of them are often in poor health. According to the study, these children are driven to the streets because of peer pressure, family breakdown and poverty.<sup>29</sup>

This is the reality in the Philippine landscape and many other countries like those in South America and other parts of Asia. The church, as it is now is already engaged in this battle against exploitation of children. In the light of Scriptures, the church is at the cutting edge of

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<sup>28</sup>Melanie Ramos, "The State of Filipino Children," *Intersect* 18, no. 1 (2003), 1.

<sup>29</sup>Ramos, 2.

fulfilling the task of being the voice in behalf of these children. Child Theology would cause us to minister with the “child-in-the-midst” method. This means reflecting on our action plans, church infrastructure, budget allocations with the needs of the children before us.

The second issue on child protection that is included in the State of the Children Report is child labor. The report says:

The number of working children is also increasing. It is estimated that there are now over four million children between the ages of five to 17 who are considered child laborers. These children work in sweatshops, factories, mines, farms and agriculture-related industries. Another two million are believed to work in exploitative conditions where they are prone to injury, disease and maltreatment.<sup>30</sup>

Prostitution is one of the ugly faces of child labor. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), most prostitutes are girls, but the number of boy prostitutes is increasing.<sup>31</sup> This particular aspect is probably one of the blind spots in the work of the church. Seldom one can see these days a church working with agencies that deal with child prostitution. Yet there is one very encouraging oasis of hope for children and youth who are victims of prostitution. Father Shay Cullen runs the Preda Foundation and his team is indefatigable in their war against child prostitution and other human rights issues. Father Shay says of the tourist who frequent child brothels, "It's everyone from the sleazy to the elite. All levels of society and every nationality."<sup>32</sup> This is a picture of trafficking in the Philippines which include not only adults but also children and youth.

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<sup>30</sup>Ramos, 3.

<sup>31</sup>“Child Labor in the Philippines,” available from [unionssaynotochildlabor.com/inthenews/the-world-of-rp%E2%80%99s-4-million-child-workers/](http://unionssaynotochildlabor.com/inthenews/the-world-of-rp%E2%80%99s-4-million-child-workers/).

<sup>32</sup>[www.pia.gov.ph/default.asp?m=12&r=&y=&mo=&fi=p081128.htm&no=18](http://www.pia.gov.ph/default.asp?m=12&r=&y=&mo=&fi=p081128.htm&no=18); accessed 27 August 2010.

With this reality in the Philippines, church workers need to reflect on the Scriptures with more intentionality: "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing," (Deuteronomy 10:18); "He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor," (Psalm 72:4); and "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked," Psalm 82:3-4. More often than not, churches tend to look at the children who are already inside the church. John Wesley proclaimed, "The world is my parish." In relation to ministering with children who are at risk, the Filipino church should step out of their boxes and look out of the confines of the church and defend the cause of child prostitutes.

The third issue on child protection that needs attention in the country is crimes against children. The following is the Data from the Women and Children Concerns Division of the Philippine National Police:<sup>33</sup>

#### Crimes against Children

CRIME	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter 2002	2 <sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2002
Rape	598	760
Acts of Lasciviousness	323	321
Physical Injuries/Maltreatment	508	642
Abduction/Kidnapping	52	67
Child Trafficking	4	7
Child Prostitution	11	11

#### Crimes in Need of Special Protection under DSWD's Custody 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter of 2002

CATEGORY	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE
Abandoned	255	123	132
Sexually Abused	1,180	12	1,168
Physically Abused	435	250	185

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<sup>33</sup>Ramos, 4.

Children in Conflict with the Law	1,796	1,670	126
Child Labor	98	58	40
Child Trafficking	10	4	6
Street Children	1,081	724	357
Disabled	5	2	3
Neglected	377	191	186

The data shows an increasing number of crimes against children. One of the steps that the church can do is to educate its members to be vigilant in their communities. Christians need to be responsible citizens. The Philippine government agencies on the welfare of women and children are encouraging people to report any incidence of neglect and abuse amongst women and children. And with the child-in-the-midst process, we can reflect on Romans 13:1 where Paul says, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God,” (NKJV). As we try to look at Scriptures with the child before us, we can obey what our government is pleading for us to do at the same time doing justice to the cause of children and those who are needy.

### **Emerging Themes in Child Theology: Implications to Ministries with Children in the Philippines**

Ministering with children in the Philippines is not a one-size-fits-all process. Children in the rural and urban areas differ in a number of ways. However, looking at the emerging themes in Child Theology, one can surmise general principles in doing ministry with children. At this point, let me point out two major emerging themes under Child Theology: (1) making children visible as corrective to the marginalization in mainstream discourse; (2) children-as-agent: re-thinking mission approaches. These themes comprise the overall concept of putting the child in the midst as Jesus did among His disciples.

## Making Children Visible

To make children visible in our homes, churches, and schools is to affirm their dignity as human beings created in the image of God. When we look at children's needs as we think about parental discipline, curriculum, church growth methods, and other strategic plans for church building and infrastructure is one way of affirming the importance of children. Children's participation in the planning, implementing, and even in evaluating church's programs also affirms the worth of children in our midst.

Rodrigo D. Tano, one of the major contributors of contextualizing Theology in the Philippines calls church leaders "to understand and communicate the Christian faith in ways that are intelligible and relevant to the culture."<sup>34</sup> Another call to present the Gospel with the context in view is the statement of Melba P. Maggay. She exhorts against preaching without knowing the needs of our audience by saying, "With easy confidence, we proceed with our one-two-three point formulation, sidestepping the differences between a full and a hungry stomach."<sup>35</sup> Reflecting on these real issues, many teachers of children are guilty of overlooking the needs and particular characteristics of their audience in the guise of dedicated ministry.

More often than not many Filipino teachers simply tell the stories with pictures from books imported from the West to children not really knowing the needs and questions a child may have. Maggay observes that "Christianity in the Philippines is a 'sandwich religion,' a layer

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<sup>34</sup>Rodrigo D. Tano, *Theology in the Philippine Setting: A Study in the Contextualization of Theology* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1981), 4.

<sup>35</sup>Melba P. Maggay, *The Gospel in Filipino Context* (Mandaluyong, MM: OMF Literature Inc., 1978), 1.

of Christian beliefs piled on top of a largely pagan slice of bread.”<sup>36</sup> In the case of working with children, teachers need to know how to help children settle, for instance, their fear of the “balete” tree, their fear of “aswang,” and other animistic beliefs.

The characteristics of Filipino children vary. Some are animistic like their parents, living in constant fear of spirits in the physical world. Some are text-savvy, children of the rich who receive big allowances, possess high-tech gadgets. Many of these children are the offspring of absentee parents: children of OFWs—they almost have it all, money, technology, except the love and physical presence of loving parents. And living in the same country, are children who are made invisible, voiceless by the environment that enslaves them. These are the marginalized: the abused, the neglected, the least, and the lost. Jesus challenges His followers: “Let the little children come to me” (Matthew 19:14). Jesus sees the children. And He does not stop them. He urges His followers to bring them to Him so He can bless them. In the same fashion, Christ is summoning Christian workers to get out of the confines of the church and look for the children who are not in the fold, so they too, can experience the love that only Christ can give.

### Children-As-Agent: Re-thinking Mission Approaches

Another theme of Child Theology is the fact that children can be both objects and instruments of missions. Reaching children and youth as perhaps *the* key strategy for church growth, for missions, and for furthering the kingdom is a brand new idea.<sup>37</sup> Dan Brewster and Luis Bush are the prime movers of the so-called “4/14” Window. They claim that most people

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>37</sup>Dan Brewster, “It’s Time to Open the 4/14 Window,” in *Emerging Missions Movements: Voices of Asia*, ed. Bambang Budijanto (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International and Asia Evangelical Alliance, 2010), 25.

who will ever come to Christ will do so between the ages of 4 and 14.<sup>38</sup> Children and youth can really be engaged as agents for mission. We can see from the Bible that God used many children and youth to bring about His purposes. One case in point is the story of Naaman and the Jewish slave girl (2 Kings 5:2). God used the girl to heal Naaman and become a witness for the God of Israel. In our local churches, children and youth can be agents for mission. They can be God's instruments in bringing their family and friends to the feet of the Savior. This gives a challenge to the leadership in our local churches. This gives the imperative of discipling our children and youth members on how to become living witnesses for Christ.

Children in the Philippines, despite their background can be discipled for Christ. A number of children and youth who were once abused, neglected, or abandoned are now leading a new life because of the transforming grace of Christ. They are now leading other children to Christ. Children can be active partners in God's mission.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it," (NIV). This and other similar verses in the Scriptures spell clearly the biblical injunction to educate the child at an early age. The Jesuits had a maxim that is parallel to this: "Give me a child for the first seven years, and you may do what you like with him afterwards."<sup>39</sup> Filipino families value education highly. Ronald E. Dolan observes, "Filipinos have a deep regard for education, which they view as a primary avenue for upward social and economic mobility."<sup>40</sup> With this in mind, Christian teachers can make use of this Filipino outlook to educate parents

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>39</sup>Jesuit Maxim, *Lean's Collectanea* 3, 1903.

<sup>40</sup>Ronald E. Dolan, ed., *Philippines: A Country Study* (Washington: Government Printing Office for the Library of Congress, 1991).

on how to raise their children so they will lead lives as a witness to other children who have not known Christ. They can become Christian children working with children in crisis. We have underestimated the potential of child ministries and of children as agents for mission.”<sup>41</sup> Isaiah 11:6 says, “. . . and a little child will lead them,” (NIV). Children in missiology is evident when we put the child in the midst. This is the way not only into the heart of the society, but also to the heart of God.<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Philippines is the largest Christian country in Southeast Asia, yet its religiosity does not coincide with the atrocities that are done to its children. Various factors contribute to the sad plight of many Filipino children. This is the entry point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Using the emerging themes of Child Theology such as making children visible and recognizing children as both objects and agents of missions, the church, by the grace that God alone grants, can minister with children effectively and holistically.

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<sup>41</sup>Keith White, “A Little Child Shall Lead Them: Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission,” A Paper Presented to the Cutting Edge Conference, De Bron, Holland, 2001.

<sup>42</sup>First Penang Consultation booklet, 21.

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