



UNCONVENTIONAL
Sisterhood

• *Feminist Catholic Nuns in the Philippines* •

Heather L. Claussen

MICHIGAN



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HEATHER L. CLAUSSEN

ANN ARBOR

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For Cil

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Prolegomenon

First, a Word

First, there was the Word—or so the Missionary Benedictine Sisters would say. And the primacy they give words is both revealing and disturbing. Words carry creative power; words, as my informants well knew, can be used both to reaffirm and to challenge the cultural worlds we inhabit. Thus, many of my primary interviewees played with their language, in good humor but often with high stakes. They were lucky, however. They were all proficient in both English and the new national language of the Philippines, Filipino, not to mention their native dialects and, frequently, other tongues, such as German or Spanish. Many Filipinos lack access to the training in English and Filipino alike provided by elite educational institutions in the Philippines, and many are thereby effectively kept from equal participation in Filipino politics and big business. In the Philippines, in short, it is difficult to gain a say in government or to make money without the right words in the right language.

So the use of words to make worlds represents a privilege and entails significant responsibility. Nor is this anywhere more obvious than in ethnography, which, by definition, entails the definition of others—often cultural others with unequal access to the words by which they are made—from an inevitably biased and interested distance. And given the desire to avoid repeating the mistakes of a neocolonialist history by misrepresenting the ethnographic field, this makes ethnography difficult to write. The thicker the words flow, the thicker the questions come—what right do I have to speak for my informants, what if my informants wouldn't agree with my interpretations of their lives, is the shorthand of their biographies shortchanging them? What does one do when confronted by a host of unique individuals with pronounced personalities that can't easily be abstracted into generalizations? What about the self-reflexive realization that one's field interactions could

not have been typical and would not be duplicable, because situated within very particular historical, social, and relational contexts?

The subjective nature of ethnography renders it difficult to say anything with any certainty: the knowledge that every word, every claim, is inevitably skewed by an outsider's point of view poses an obstacle to the assertion of anything positive whatsoever. The assertion of anything substantial concerning "the field" is always vulnerable to deconstruction and to critiques of the systems of privilege supporting ethnography in the first place. Yet I remain convinced—perhaps due my own interest in the matter—that the attempt to communicate something about alternative cultural possibilities is of value in its own right. It would be too easy to give up, lapsing into silence—but wouldn't this ultimately represent a victory for ignorance and isolationism? I would rather try to tell the story of my fieldwork, notwithstanding all the risks involved, with words to problematize my very words.

And what is my tale about? It is about a select group of Filipina Missionary Benedictine Sisters—all of whose names have been changed to preserve confidentiality—who agreed to share something of themselves with me during the tenure of my research in Metropolitan Manila in the mid-1990s.¹ It is about my informants' attempts to challenge and renegotiate assumptions about what womanhood can and should mean within the modern-day Philippines. It is about the ways in which the nuns understand their faith as motivating and justifying radical action. It is about the social significance of visionaries like Sister Justine, perhaps best known as cofounder and former chair of the umbrella feminist organization GABRIELA. It is about individual agency in effecting cultural change not only through large-scale public action but also on a smaller, more local, more personal scale. It is about Filipina feminism—and feminism more generally—as a contested and complicated cultural category. Finally, it is about friendship and about treasured moments of communication across the divides of experience and perspective that separated my informants and me.

Nor is any of this insignificant. For one thing, although anthropological interest in the Philippine Islands has grown over the past twenty years—as evidenced by the laudable work of Cannell (1999), Dumont (1992), Iletto (1979), Johnson (1997), Mulder (1996), Ness (1992), Pertierra (1988, 1995), Rafael (1988, 1995), M. Rosaldo (1980a), and R. Rosaldo (1980), to name just a few examples—the Philippines itself has been long marginalized within anthropology (not to mention Southeast Asian Studies) due to trenchant international (and national) misconceptions concerning a purported lack of "culture" (including

material culture) in the multiply colonized, and thus superficially quite Hispanicized and Americanized, lowlands. While the Philippines' unique colonial history may render it less immediately interesting to Western anthropologists seduced by the exoticism of other Southeast Asian nations with very different colonial histories and thus different national religiocultural histories, however, I would dispute the claim that the Philippines lacks its own cultural vitality, following the lead of both R. Rosaldo (1980), who problematizes the belief that "pristine" societies are better subjects for study than societies "contaminated" by other cultural influences, and Cannell (1999), who lucidly argues the significance of indigenous perspectives and practices despite both a veneer of "Westernization" and local assumptions of "culturelessness" in Bicol.

Moreover, insofar as the Philippines stands in contrast to much of the rest of Southeast Asia as the only (and significantly) predominantly Christian country in the region, I would maintain the particular value of ethnographic explorations of the ways in which Catholicism has not only heavily influenced Filipino "mainstream" culture (itself partly a matter of nationally internalized and promoted stereotypes often emphasizing the processes of "Westernization"), but has also done so in a markedly Filipino fashion, with a markedly Filipino flavor.² Most of the (often exemplary) work done on Philippine Catholicism to date concerns popular religious practice, the church leadership, and male orders, however (see, e.g., Cannell 1999; de la Costa 1961; Iletto 1979; Pertierra 1988; Rafael 1988; Santiago 1995; Schumacher 1981, 1987; Shoesmith 1985; and Youngblood 1990). Filipina religious sisterhood has been largely ignored, perhaps partly due to the mistaken assumption that nuns are both boring and culturally insignificant, and partly precisely because women remain marginalized within the official Church hierarchy (from which congregations like that of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters retain some administrative distance but to which monastic orders still ultimately answer). Indeed, female monasticism elsewhere hasn't received much more ethnographic attention: with the exception of Sanchez's study of nuns in Puerto Rico (1983) and assorted sociological, journalistic, and biographical studies focused on women religious in the United States and Great Britain (e.g., Bernstein 1976; Campbell-Jones 1979; Ebaugh 1993; Norris 1996; Rogers 1996), anthropologists have paid little heed to Catholic women's congregations.³ In the Philippine context, however, the Missionary Benedictines are significant social actors and warrant attention as such.

In fact, the Missionary Benedictines have formed an Institute of Women's Studies in Metro Manila—managed by Sister Justine, who has publicly defined herself as a spokesperson for Philippine feminism, cofounded two well-known Philippine feminist organizations (including GABRIELA), and catalyzed the congregation's growing concern with gender issues. On the other hand, many of the nuns also enact their politics in less obvious, more private ways during the course of their everyday lives: protesting sexist language, challenging students to reinvent their religion, and counseling women to take control over their own bodies and sexuality. Nor can their "feminism" be directly attributed to involvement with Philippine nationalist groups, notwithstanding an emphasis on the connections between Philippine nationalism and Philippine feminism in most of the extant literature on the subject. As will be further discussed in my final chapter, Aguilar (1988), Aquino (1985), and West (1992) have made notable contributions to the otherwise sparse literature on the topic, stressing the ways in which Filipina involvement in nationalist groups has engendered a concern with women's issues within the specific context of neocolonialism. The sisters, however, primarily understand their own commitment to women's rights issues as a religious impulse; in short, their faith dictates and is central to their politics.

The present study not only expands the scope of current scholarship on Philippine feminism, though; it also speaks to a lack of specifically ethnographic work focused on consciously "feminist" collectives worldwide. Rapidly globalizing urban environments like Metropolitan Manila merit further ethnographic exploration, too. Notwithstanding the city's vast size and increasingly unstable, ethnically mixed, population, Metro Manila—often termed the "center" of the nation—is in fact of particular anthropological interest as the locus of dynamic political and ideological debates concerning both the negotiation of national identity amid intense diversity and "modernization" within a larger international context. And the Missionary Benedictines—simultaneously very much concerned with the affirmation and display of their Philippine identity and very much engaged in transnational ideological discourses (and practices) as members of a global congregation—afford significant insights into the ways in which culture is being simultaneously reclaimed and reshaped in the National Capital Region.

Of course, most of the Missionary Benedictines discussed neither themselves nor their projects with me in such abstract fashion. Instead, they told me stories and invited me into their daily lives.⁴ Not that doing participant observation with them was always easy. The nuns not

only were often extremely busy with their assignments but also represented a relatively inaccessible subject population. While female, unmarried, and even “good nun material” by my informants’ own reckoning, I still always remained only a lay visitor. And this prohibited my direct involvement in all aspects of the Missionary Benedictines’ lives. The sisters slept and ate their evening meals in cloister, and their cells and communal recreation sessions were off-limits even to the postulants and novices in formation; in short, they spent significant time in spaces I could only learn about secondhand.

On the other hand, I did participate in the nuns’ evening prayers, attend their searches in, visit their formation house, witness important religious rites, sit in on SSC classes, and occasionally accompany my informants on excursions outside of the convent. Moreover, we talked. Admittedly, these discussions primarily took the form of scheduled interviews during which I was treated to treasured pieces of the sisters’ life stories.⁵ As I got to know my interviewees better, however, our get-togethers became less formalized: we settled down to amiable chats in between prayer and work hours, not only providing mutually agreeable interactive opportunities but also affording me a chance to learn about issues of personal identity on a more intimate scale. Nor did our conversation, on such occasions, consist only of biographical details and theoretical questions. We also talked of more mundane if nevertheless relevant things: Sister Josephine’s headaches and teaching triumphs; Sister Virginia’s motion sickness and family relationships; Sister Micha’s student worries and swimming breaks. And, without doubt, the latter’s self-professed and loudly pronounced delight upon hearing me tagged her American *kaibigan*, or “friend,” remains one of the highlights of my field experience.⁶

Indeed, I felt most fulfilled as an anthropologist in getting to know my informants as unique individuals, and I have endeavored to remain true to them in writing this book. While the interactions recounted here barely hint at the richly layered hours my interviewees and I spent together, I have made a sincere attempt both to reveal something of what it means to be Missionary Benedictine and to replicate something of the feel of the Philippines. Likewise, I have done my best to provide a window into the processes of ethnographic discovery that I myself went through by privileging the narrative itself, without the distraction and inevitable distancing of a conventional prefatorial outline.

Now, then, on to the congregation headquarters in Metro Manila.

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.¹ 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-

ticularly 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.² 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 Skyflakes 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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-

terous 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 (Shoemith 1985).⁷ 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).⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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).¹² 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 handmaidens.”¹³

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-aram* 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 “contenance,” 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).¹⁴ 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—themselves 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 *timbang 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.”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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—nor, 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.¹⁸ 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, Iletto [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 groundbreaking operation.²¹ 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.²² Prior to Spanish colonization in 1565, the Philippines did not exist as a nation.²³ 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.²⁴ All of this changed, however, with the establishment of a strong Spanish military and religious presence in the archipelago.²⁵ 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.²⁶ Thus, the nation was initially configured as such not by its citizenry but by outsiders with questionable 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.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.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.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 *pasyon* cycle (Ileto 1979).³⁰ In fact, nationalist hero José Rizal's 1896 martyrdom at the hands of the Spanish prompted hitherto hesitant *ilustrados*—the propertied, well-educated upper class—to rally behind the religio-nationalist *Katipunan*, led by Andres Bonfacio and, subsequently, Emilio Aguinaldo (Goodno 1991; Karnow 1989; Steinberg 1994).³¹

While the *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.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).³³ 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 1972.³⁴

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.³⁵

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.

What Makes a Woman?

Fully understanding the vocation entails not only attending to Philippine history and the sisters' narratives of faith, of course, but also examining the complicated cultural networks of obligation and influence delineating the possibilities of life as a Filipina in the modern day. As intimated earlier, many candidates face significant parental, and particularly paternal, disapproval, often prompting fervent efforts to achieve reconciliation. During one of the searches, for instance, Sister Micha introduced herself with her usual dramatic flair. "Sister Micha," she loudly stated, pausing to allow her audience time to register the somewhat uncommon appellation. Then she explained. She was really Sister Michael, a name she had requested and received upon making her first profession. Michael was in fact her father's name and her choice was a peace offering to a man who opposed her vocation. Nor was this uncommon. While such choices sometimes simply reflect filial love and respect, many sisters adopt paternal names as a means of appeasement precisely because many fathers object to the convent, instead advocating marriage and childbearing.

If biological maternity is unlikely in the nunnery, however, the adoption of paternal appellations affords another means of providing another "junior" in response to concerns about the future of the family. But such tactics could be surprisingly problematic. For instance, Sister Micha observed, she used to have such a time calling home. "Who are you calling for, please?" the operator would ask. "Mister Michael Montano." "And who is calling, please?" "Sister Michael Montano." "No, no, who is CALLING, please?" "Sister Michael Montano." "No, I need YOUR name, please, ma'am." "SISTER MICHAEL MONTANO IS CALLING FOR MISTER MICHAEL MONTANO!" This, she said, was why she had decided to shorten *Michael* to *Micha*, with a "ch" if you don't mind.

ARGUING OVER ABANDONMENT

Of course, Sister Micha's phone predicaments seem mild in comparison to Sister Virginia's difficulties. The vocation directress confessed her father hadn't exactly been congratulatory when she announced her decision to enter the convent. At first, he simply went quiet. Then the objections started. He knew she wanted to help people. But wasn't her work as a parish pastoral council secretary in Pampanga enough? The priests he saw were always arguing, but she wasn't a fighter: she was too happy-go-lucky. She wasn't *mahinhin* (demure), either. Her sister seemed more frail and holy: why didn't she want to enter instead? Or her brother? Sister Virginia's father had fully supported her brother's abortive stint as a seminarian; she even suspected he had once aspired to the priesthood himself. It was just that he didn't want *her* to join the convent.

Not that the sister had been well equipped to argue her case. At the time, she, too, thought herself an unusual candidate for the congregation. Like Sister Josephine, who initially presumed herself "too extroverted" for the convent and whose childhood *barkada* had been shocked at her entry given her reputation for daring, Sister Virginia simply didn't feel like good "nun material." After all, notwithstanding the Missionary Benedictines' current search in attempts to challenge such stereotypes, being a nun in the Philippines is still popularly assumed to entail propriety, passivity, and moral and intellectual dogmatism. Moreover, the convent has long been publicly understood and represented as a "default" option for "unmarriageable" and/or simply unmarried women. Indeed, Maria Clara, the beautiful but rather ineffectual heroine of Rizal's widely read *Noli Me Tangere*, takes refuge in the convent upon her lover's apparent death, not because called by God, but in an attempt to escape sorrow and societal pressures to wed someone else.

Nor were my lay Filipino acquaintances lacking in stories of sisterly rigidity. Many of them spoke of the nuns they'd encountered in convent school as sternly unforgiving figures wielding sticks to slap them into adherence to petty rules. One told me in graphic detail of a daily "petticoat check," wherein—notwithstanding the tropical heat and arguable frivolity of itchy schoolgirl slips—bare legs beneath the student skirt meant a misdemeanor. Speaking Tagalog was also out, resulting in a detention when overheard by authorities convinced, in true colonialist fashion, of the importance of English within the classroom.

And mixing with males was definitely forbidden in light of the imagined sexual experimentation such communality might beget.

In actuality, of course, the Missionary Benedictines were hardly morally uptight, prayer-happy disciplinarians. Indeed, Sister Micha in particular took great pains to establish herself as a foil to popular conceptions of sisterhood—ironically thereby not only challenging but also underlining the tenacity of such prejudices. She mischievously pulled my braids, used sexually explicit language, sarcastically poked fun at official church dogma, and as often as not greeted me with her feet happily propped up on the third shelf of a cabinet beside her desk (the public alternative, she said, to her private preference for roosting her toes on the desk itself). She was a “free spirit,” she explained, and always had been. Even as a child, she had often been the only one smiling in their family photographs: while her sisters had done their best to preserve decorum, she had never cared much about other peoples’ opinions.

Nor had Sister Virginia, for that matter; ultimately, not even her father could dissuade her from entry. Not that she outright argued with him. Rather when he rejected her attempts at explanation, she simply stopped talking about it, “as women do in the Philippines.” But her father knew he hadn’t succeeded in changing her mind. So, he left—actually abandoning his family, without telling anyone where he was going, in a radical preemptive move to physically distance himself from the situation.

But one of Sister Virginia’s little brothers was graduating from sixth grade and wanted their father there for the ceremony. So the sister set off to find him. She took the bus to a major depot in Ilocos, where she slept on the station benches until the municipal hall opened at 6 A.M. Then, when morning came, a city official directed her to a house where several Pampangan businessmen lived—some of whom actually knew her father. After she explained who she was, they took her two towns away, where they found him doing business on the streets with a load of goods slung over his shoulders. And, when he saw his daughter, he agreed to come home.

Not that anything was really resolved, though. Sister Virginia simply began lying to her parents after that, pretending she was visiting her sister in Manila when on retreat at the priory house.¹ Moreover, she slowly, discreetly, packed the few things she would need as a postulant and left them in safekeeping elsewhere. Then, when it was time for entry, she asked the local parish priest to accompany her to the formation house. And she departed for the city with only her purse in hand,

her parents unsuspecting when she kissed them good-bye. She didn't really like leaving this way, but she didn't think she would be able to go if she had to confront her father. Instead, Sister Virginia left that duty to the parish priest, who returned alone from Metro Manila to comfort him in the midst of his tears.

Despite the priest's best efforts, however, her father didn't accept her vocation for quite some time. Whenever her mother and siblings came to visit, her father stayed home. Nor was this easy, as Sister Virginia and her father had always been particularly close. So she chose a religious name in his honor. She asked to be called *Virginia* for the Virgin Mary, whom her father loved very much and with whom he claimed to have whiled away his hours as a child.² And, luckily, the appellatory gesture worked. Her father joined her mother in walking her down the aisle for her final profession, making her the "happiest one there."

UNNATURAL WOMANHOOD?

Likewise, Sister Josephine's father ultimately reconciled himself to her vocation, although he, too, initially objected to her entry. In his opinion, the sisterhood simply wasn't appropriate: women were supposed to aspire to matrimony and motherhood instead. Nor was he alone in his biases. An uncle of the sister's—a very promiscuous uncle, she said, with multiple mistresses, children, and houses—asked her father what she was "missing," intimating that there was something wrong with any woman who didn't prioritize finding a husband and having a family. After all, both men were invested in keeping women dependent within the domestic realm.

Luckily, however, the sister's father finally permitted her entry, with her assurance that she would leave if unhappy. And this, of course, was quite possible. The sisters are hardly trapped in the convent; even those with perpetual vows are free to get out, get a job, and get married should they deem this God's will. But Sister Josephine chose to remain, much to her father's dismay. He had been banking on her dissatisfaction with the life, and when she told him she wanted to stay, he called her home with a fabricated request for help with her youngest sister.³ Moreover, having enticed her back to the province, he had her cousins look for a boyfriend for her, much to her irritation. Why weren't they looking for suitors for themselves instead?

By the time she got them to admit the whole thing was her father's doing, two years had passed, and her superiors were calling her back.

So, she decided to return. Not that her father was happy with the decision; he continued to complain up until he first actually saw her in the habit. But he stopped badgering her then. By that time, he had had some experience with her sisters' matrimonial and maternal difficulties. Admittedly, her brothers also had marital problems, but, as a traditional Filipino male, her father felt responsible for his daughters' well-being while more readily acknowledging his sons' independence. Indeed, the assumption that women need male protection had fueled his initial resistance to her vocation: who would protect her, with no men around? Ironically, notwithstanding his own questionable record, it took her sisters' spouses to prove that husbands don't always guarantee support and security and to convince him that the Missionary Benedictine life might be a good alternative to marriage.

THE PUZZLE OF PATERNAL DISAPPROVAL

Why such initial recalcitrance on the part of Philippine fathers in the face of their daughters' postulancy, however? Sister Micha herself confessed to bewilderment at the prevalence of the phenomenon, although she was the first to draw my attention to the puzzle of paternal name taking within the convent. Nor did my other informants have anything but vague and situation-specific explanations of the "father problem." Yet while the particularities of every instance of fatherly reluctance clearly vary, the apparent pattern—precisely because apparently a pattern—demands investigation.

To begin with, consider the cultural weight granted the *pamilya*, or "family," in the Philippines. A great deal of the scholarly work done on the Philippines identifies family as an institution of primary importance within Filipino culture; moreover, both individually and as a society, Filipinos understand themselves to be extremely family oriented.⁴ To some extent, of course, such familial solidarity is clearly more myth than reality, more self-presentation than everyday action. Nevertheless, most Filipinos remain invested in thinking of themselves as "family people" (particularly by comparison to Americans), attaching moral and emotional meaning to the claim. And such cultural valuation of the *pamilya* is justified not only with reference to Philippine tradition but also, in this largely Catholic country, with reference to the biblical mandate to honor and obey one's parents. Family plays a role in politics, too; the political system effectively involves the rule of large family dynasties, and Filipino political loyalties themselves are often deter-

mined primarily by extended and historical familial connections. In addition, most Filipinos working abroad send their earnings home, and many live with their families not only until but also after marriage. Filipino holidays are also popularly understood to be “family days,” and important life choices (involving, for example, education, marriage partners, or career options) are generally understood to be not only individual but also “family” choices. Moreover, if standing by family warrants praise, abandoning family warrants condemnation, whether child or parent, and most particularly if female; while cultural stereotypes of male irresponsibility and wanderlust render male lapses understandable if not entirely excusable, women are expected to be primarily family oriented.

Such notions of familial duty are also commonly justified with reference to *utang na loob*. Although the Tagalog phrase is often translated as “debts of gratitude,” there is no truly adequate equivalent for *loob* in the English language. *Loob* can mean the soul, the inside, the inner life, or the will, among other things; in reality, shades of all these meanings are always present in its usage. Moreover, while *utang na loob* sometimes simply fuels the exchange of small favors, it is more usually considered a matter of deeply felt, highly emotionally laden debts or obligations incurred by the “soul” itself. Without it, one is *walang hiya* or *shameless*—a very bad thing in the Philippines. Admittedly, the importance typically accorded *utang na loob* in the Philippines is at least partly due to the incorporation of overly simplistic sociological stereotyping into the Philippine educational system during the past fifty years; nevertheless, the concept warrants attention precisely because it is now integral to national narratives of identity.⁵

And, notably, *utang na loob* gains perhaps its purest expression in the debt children owe their parents. Hence, for example, a multitude of Philippine proverbs reiterating the same message: “Though you chop off your flesh and add even your bones and your hair, it is still not enough to repay the hardships of your parents”; “A child who is ungrateful to her parents meets downfall rather than success”; “A disobedient child will come to an unworthy end”; “If you dishonor your parents, no matter how hard you strive to earn, you can never see the merits of your earnings”; “Love for parents can never be excessive; rather it is always insufficient”; “Love of parents cannot be repaid”; “When we were born our parents suffered a lot, we must therefore remember all the teachings of our elders”; “You cannot repay the sacrifices of your parents unless you can cook on the palm of your hand.”⁶ In short, specifically filial *utang na loob* is not only prototypical

of other debts in the Philippines but also appears of great sociomoral and motivational significance within the family context.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

My informants' filial disobedience is particularly remarkable, then, within the Philippine setting. After all, we are speaking here of women deeply invested in questions of morality, highly motivated to serve and love others, and intensely concerned with personal integrity. This is a population with a conscience—a culturally constructed conscience, rendering familial insubordination not only publicly shameful but also, and probably more importantly, an emotionally trying, guilt-ridden, thing.

Nor is leaving home in and of itself easy for most postulants. Sister Constance, for example, told me that saying good-bye to her family was the hardest thing about becoming a nun. And Sister Josephine began her career as a nun homesick and teary eyed; living away from home during formation was far more difficult for her than was adjusting to other aspects of the life. No room is made for family visits outside the Marikina grounds during the yearlong postulancy, and the reins are tightened further in the second year of the novitiate, during which time novices are prohibited entirely from seeing, much less writing their families. Such strict separation had been new for Sister Josephine, who, like many entrants, had never really spent time away from her parents and siblings prior to entry: "We would come home and always ask to be together. We would eat together. Especially when my father was away from business—all the children and my mommy, we would be together. When he was not out on work, when he was there, we would stay together. . . . We would sit together in the *sala*."

Notably, such culturally encouraged familial attachments not only render entry very emotionally difficult for most candidates but have also been productive of changes in Missionary Benedictine practice in the Philippine context. The founding Germans significantly restricted family visitation rights. In the modern-day Philippine context, however, "reasonable" requests for home leave are usually granted. While formation still entails separation from parents and siblings, and while Sister Mary Peter confessed, "I probably cannot go back as regularly and as often as I would have wanted, because in terms of our constitution we are allowed to only go home for a year: ten days," the desire to maintain familial connections is nevertheless now accommodated and even

granted cultural value within the sisterhood. Now, for example, Sister Josephine goes home after Christmas every year. And Sister Virginia was given leave to see her dying father and then attend his funeral. Moreover, Sister Micha not only called home regularly enough to warrant a name change but also spent one entire interview session proudly showing me a set of family photographs she kept in her cell (numbering among the few personal possessions she allowed herself). Lastly, Sister Mary Peter emphasized how important it was to her to be able to visit her elderly mother at least once annually.

Family members are allowed to visit fully professed sisters at the convent, too. I encountered Sister Mary Peter's nephew and his wife waiting for her in the priory reception area one morning; another afternoon, I spent a good fifteen minutes conversing with a toothless six-year-old in colorful tie-dye come all the way from Bulacan to see her aunt, Sister Mercedes. And others of my informants told me how much they looked forward to relatives stopping by.

REINTERPRETING FILIPINO FAMILY LOYALTY

While yearly leave and family visits doubtless make the separation necessitated by convent membership more palatable, however—rendering the crisis of daughterly disobedience less absolute and more easily reconcilable—the decision to enter the convent also arguably entails and can even be justified by the reinterpretation of such key cultural concepts as *utang na loob* and family duty. Although aspirant families often read their daughters' vocational ambitions primarily in terms of pending loss, new entrants—even reluctant and filially attached entrants—clearly understand the call to the sisterhood in very different terms. Indeed, the simultaneously self-serving and socially responsible reconceptualization of familial obligations and loyalties in monastic terms may offer many Philippine nuns a tenable means of negotiating between vocational and parental directives pulling them in different directions.

For one thing, the affective load carried by cultural imperatives like that of familial obligation may render the mandate to obedience to a supreme "Father" all the more compelling. As Rafael (1988) suggests, while the debt owed parents may be prototypical of *utang na loob*, the debt owed God may ultimately take primacy. If undying gratitude is due parents for their very reproductive responsibility, how much more powerful the call to repay the original "Maker" for "his" gift of life? In short,

my informants are not in fact *walang hiya* but rather appear motivated by a particularly highly developed sense of responsibility—productive of a spiritual imperative to serve God as primal genitor.

Of course, the notion of family is also open to other forms of reinterpretation and transference, with a good deal of its emotional load intact. Although Filipinos invoke fictive kinship, at times, simply to be polite (elderly women are often respectfully addressed as *lola*, or “grandmother”), kin terms are also employed to claim, forge, or reaffirm close, interdependent, and at least potentially significant and mutually beneficial connections with persons who would not otherwise be categorized in such fashion. Thus, for example, my landlady, Mrs. Seth, and her youngest son called me *ate* (“older sister”). I, in turn, was invited to call a close friend’s uncles and aunts *tito* and *tita*. Moreover, upon returning from her annual home visit, Sister Josephine announced that she was now a *lola*. One of her nephews now had a daughter of his own, and, while she could not assert strictly biological grandparenthood, her extended family was more than willing to allow her the privileges of grandmotherhood.

The larger equation of the congregation itself with “family” is significant, too. While becoming a nun represents a renunciation of the *pamilya* as customarily understood, it also involves incorporation into a new *pamilya* of primary reference. The nuns refer to one another as “sisters” and to their mother superior as a “mother,” following a classical tradition seemingly particularly suited to the Philippine context. The use of such terminology indicates and indexes at least the possibility of enduring, emotionally significant, and mutually supportive relationships within the religious community. What’s more, such terminological usage doubtless encourages at least the partial transference of affect associated with the biological family to the larger congregation, particularly in light of the radical separation and collective indoctrination broadly characterizing the first years of formation. In addition, such linguistic fictions probably provide some degree of social legitimation in the face of accusations of familial abandonment.

Nor is such usage the only example of the extension of kinship terminology and its attendant cultural load to the convent situation. Consider, for example, Sister Sylvia’s claim that, while she once regretted not having children, she now felt the whole world to be her family. Both her statement and her prefatory suggestion that “every woman wants a husband and children at some point in her life” evidence a concern with having given up something of great cultural and personal importance—the chance to have a “real” *pamilya*. Yet she has creatively man-

aged to turn an apparent lack into an advantage, reconciling herself (and others) to her choice by reclaiming maternity on a larger scale. By her own reckoning, she was not only making good on her culturally mandated duty to motherhood through her religious vocation, but in fact was doing so in virtually superhuman fashion, taking on much greater responsibility than she would have been able to manage had she limited her ambitions to the nuclear level.

REPRODUCING MOTHERHOOD

Notably, Sister Sylvia's investment in universalizing her sense of family reflects back on the puzzle of paternal disapproval. As discussed earlier, fatherly resistance to the vocation probably can be at least partly understood in terms of the pressures placed on Filipina daughters to bear children, not only in fulfillment of their maternal destiny (popularly construed as both biological and religious) but also in fulfillment of a filial obligation to provide their own parents with grandchildren. Indeed, Illo observes that the women she studied in Bantigue placed great emphasis on their own reproductive capacities and "were viewed and were trained to view themselves in terms of nurturing roles" (1995, 215).

Specifically paternal concern with daughterly maternal potential may have something to do with the special nature of father-daughter relationships in the Philippine context, too. Most Filipinas maintain intensive female friendship networks to which they have recourse when in need of emotional support. Philippine men, however, seem to have fewer support options available to them. Although not all male-male relationships are competitive, many are, and outside the family, male-female relationships are often sexualized. The father-daughter bond, however, may provide men a unique opportunity for emotional intimacy of a protective but not competitive or sexual sort, at least partially explaining paternal investment in the maintenance of long-term relationships with favored daughters.

Nor is this all. Daughters, more than sons, can usually be relied upon to maintain lifelong strong economic, legal, and affective ties with their natal families, doubtless partly because the domestic sphere remains heavily gendered in the Philippines. Moreover, as women, daughters are typically given primary responsibility for their own children. Thus, daughters not only provide parents some guarantee of care in old age but also offer the promise of extended familial connections with future generations. While sons may be encouraged to take up a religious voca-

tion as a laudable career move, then, daughterly interest in the vocation may be presumed to signify both the abdication of filial responsibility for parental welfare and the loss of grandparent potential.

WOMEN'S WORK

There are other ways, too, in which familial obligations are gendered; in fact, Sister Josephine's father's disapproval of the vocation evidences concern about her choice to ignore what are usually understood to be "primary" female responsibilities in favor of professional work. Although it is difficult to generalize about the entire archipelago, Christian Filipino girls and boys are typically socialized into very different roles. "In the Philippines, cultural ideals define female work as destined to be done for and in the home, while male work basically covers tasks performed outside the home" (Gonzales and Hollnsteiner in Illo 1995, 218). Indeed, women's work is often understood as different from men's work even when and where women contribute to the household through activities outside the home itself (Illo 1995). And, notwithstanding sometime discrepancies between the ideal and actual given variation in family makeup, family needs, and family member capabilities, the domestication of women often starts young, with gender-role differentiation gaining in importance as puberty approaches. Filipina girls are typically expected to perform numerous domestic duties without excessive coercion, while a certain laxity is tolerated in most boys, who are presumed naturally "wild" and uncontrollable and thus much more unreliable than their female peers.⁷ Aquino (1985) observes that girls tend to be assigned more household responsibility than their male counterparts, while Sister Josephine said she used to wonder: "my bothers, why were they more privileged than I am? In fact, I work harder than they do. They just eat what I cook. I was conscious of that even when young . . . and I used to question my mom."

If Sister Josephine herself experienced such differential treatment as unfair, however, her mother, it seems, was unwilling to question the household division of labor. In ironic reference to the aforementioned cultural misconceptions about what it means to be a nun, the sister observed, laughing, that her mother had been "more in the convent than the Missionary Benedictines!" No, not really. Just that she was very insulated: she stayed home, took care of the children, and never went out alone. The strict segregation of household labor and power, Sister Josephine explained, "was very strong in the upbringing of my parents,

and even us indirectly, the way we were made to grow up—very Spanish. The women were subdued, the women were secondary citizens. The man was the one who made the decisions. . . . if we talked when we were not asked, we may not—(we could talk) only when given the chance.”

Such recollections are further supported by Illo’s observations that male headship remains a popular cultural ideal and that “within the family-household, power and authority rest on men, who reportedly head about 88 percent of all Philippine households” (1997, 13). On the other hand, Illo also problematizes the degree to which the assumption of male household control has skewed data collection, suggesting that “the conceptualisation of a singular, male household head is becoming archaic” (1992, 185). Her words of caution are worth attending to, too. In fact, the recognition of male familial authority in the Philippines more generally stands in opposition to simultaneous claims concerning female control of the domestic sphere (see, e.g., Steinberg 1994). The Philippines boasts something of a national myth of matriarchy, and, while it is important to recognize the myth as a myth (and as potentially obstructive to the reconfiguration of gender dynamics within the home) it is also important to acknowledge the probability of some truth to the suggestion that at least some Filipinas retain significant power within the home. Indeed, the tenacity of contradictory representations of modern Filipina womanhood as strongly independent on the one hand and as very much subordinate to men on the other hand (Blanc-Szanton 1990) suggests the very impossibility of generalizing about the ways in which gender is negotiated in the Philippines. In actuality, role assignments within individual households vary; some Philippine spouses share authority more equitably than others.

Nor is “power” within the home always easy to measure, particularly given male absenteeism. Sister Josephine’s father, in whom was vested the responsibility for decision making, was often gone from the house. When around, he was king; when not around, though, he still expected his wife to take care of things, as she somehow did. The Seth household wasn’t much different, either. A not atypical, albeit ethnically Indian, middle-class Manileño woman, Mrs. Seth worked very hard at maintaining a happy home—even with severe back problems that should have kept her in bed.⁸ Despite the significant aid of domestic servants who took care of the cleaning and some of the cooking, she rose early every morning to help her children prepare for school, then saw them off, ate her own breakfast, went to work, rushed home to make sure the kids got lunch, returned to work, supervised the cooking of dinner at the end of the day, assisted her youngest with his homework, completed

her own paperwork, paid the bills, and finally made it to bed late at night for a mere five or six hours of sleep before starting the cycle all over. Moreover, almost all of this was done without the help of her husband, who left her to pay the children's significant school expenses from her own pocket and who slept well into the morning after coming home late at night, if at all, from an evening of gambling and consorting with mistresses. Indeed, his only real contribution to the family seemed to be the fear he instilled in his wife and children alike. More than once, I had to rush out the door while my hosts scurried around to efface all traces of there having been such a frivolous thing as a guest in the house, and Arjun, the youngest, hid from his father in our rental on occasion, while the family domestic helpers were barely brave enough to answer the door during Mr. Seth's waking hours.

In effect, then, Mr. Seth was more an obstacle to than an integral part of the household; all the responsibility, in this particular case, fell on his wife. This setup was not unusual, either. Taking care of everyday family welfare is typically defined within the Philippines as women's business, even when women are also working outside precisely in order to keep the home going. In fact, the "average wife spends eight or more hours a day over 29 days each month performing household duties" (Aguilar 1988, 41; see also Illo 1997), while a full 70 percent of Filipina wives primarily identify not as paid wage earners but as housekeepers (Aguilar 1988). Indeed, while the *maybahay* (literally "owner of the house," commonly used as shorthand for "married woman") is traditionally understood as someone who does not engage in wage work, Illo (1995) suggests that even women who partake in economic enterprises outside the domestic sphere understand themselves and their labor chiefly in terms of household support.

Of course, in some ways, all of these responsibilities involve a certain amount of local and perhaps often overlooked power on the part of Filipinas; indeed, scholars of the Philippines have argued that female responsibility for household spending represents a sign and potential source of female empowerment (Andres and Ilada-Andres 1987; Steinberg 1994). On the other hand, Mrs. Seth herself made it clear that control of the purse was as much a duty as a privilege. Having to pay day-to-day bills does not necessarily guarantee or indicate the ability to make major purchasing decisions; rather, it often simply entails a struggle to stretch the household income to cover expenses, representing as much a source of stress as a source of significant power.

And control of the purse can be particularly problematic where male contributions to family income are minimal. Notwithstanding the

sometime absence and consequent economic negligence of husbands and fathers, men are usually presumed the main source of familial economic support in the Philippines, while women are presumed already provided for and therefore less in need of financial compensation.⁹ Female careers tend to be undervalued by family members and bosses alike, as in the case of my friend Tita Em, whose vending business was taken as a “hobby.” Male careers, on the other hand, tend to be granted primacy, warranting both a reprieve from domestic chores and higher pay (Illo 1997).

Moreover, notwithstanding national pride in the number of Filipinas involved in the workforce, high-status positions, including important managerial and administrative positions, tend to be occupied by men. Although some women, such as former president Corazon Aquino, continue to break through such gender barriers into positions of power and privilege, those who do so often succeed only because supported by male relatives. It is far more common for women working outside the home to take on poorly compensated labor—for example, domestic service, secretarial/clerical work, teaching, or nursing (Eviota 1992; see also Illo 1997). Many women engage in relatively unskilled, tedious, and potentially hazardous work in multinational garment, textile, handicraft, or electronics factories in Philippine Export Processing Zones (EPZs), too. Such industries preferentially hire women partly precisely because women can be paid less according to the logic of the household division of labor (Eviota 1992).

EDUCATION

Education in the Philippines is also gendered. While the republic boasts a comparatively good global record with respect to female educational attainment, Philippine women still lag behind their male compatriots. Families lacking the resources to send all their children to school typically prioritize male offspring, assuming their daughters likely to marry primary breadwinners and thus less likely to benefit from the sort of education deemed important to male career development.

Female scholastic opportunities may be circumscribed for other reasons, too. Sister Placid, for example, originally wanted to attend the University of the Philippines (UP) because “at that time the UP was carrying still the liberal arts kind of education, strong in the humanities and all of that . . . free range of ideas, free market of ideas.” Her mother vetoed the politically radical, coed university in favor of a Catholic col-

lege, however, assuming the latter more likely to provide proper moral guardianship. Indeed, such attitudes probably support the continued prevalence of nun-run all-female colleges in the Philippines. While the Missionary Benedictines are committed to promoting critical thinking and a leftist politics, St. Scholastica's College doubtless still appeals to parents largely because presumed protective of female innocence.¹⁰

But female "overeducation" isn't dangerous only because potentially morally corrupting—it is also perceived as threatening to the *pamilya*. One of my lay informants told me many Filipinas wouldn't think of pursuing a higher degree. She herself felt ambivalent about going on for a master's degree; the degree would render her less marriageable, and you'd hardly find any man willing to wed a female Ph.D. The single life was not an attractive alternative to her, either: unmarried women over twenty-five are viewed with suspicion in the Philippines, and subject to gossip concerning their spinsterhood and its suggestion of flawed femininity.

Indeed, her commentary clearly represented an indirect warning to me—the anthropologist in pursuit of a higher degree with no man in sight—and she wasn't the only one to suggest that my academic standing was somewhat morally and socially suspect by local standards. I was told by the foundation sponsoring my research to expect a driver at customs upon my arrival in the Philippines. No one stepped forward when I disembarked, however, and I ended up wandering around the airport at something of a loss until I spied a man holding a sign for "Mr. Hizer Claussen." "I think I'm the one you're looking for," I smiled, approaching him. "You!?" he responded, uncomprehending. "Heather Claussen—that's me, Heather Claussen." He still looked dubious, peering at the sign he'd made. "For the Philippine-American Educational Foundation . . . They told me someone would pick me up," I said, showing him papers with official letterhead identifying me as a Claussen. And he apologized. He'd seen me disembark from the plane but hadn't displayed the welcome card because nobody had bothered to let him know I was a woman. By default, he simply assumed I would be male.

Why? Perhaps *Heather*, a decidedly strange name by Philippine standards, simply sounded masculine to the man. But I suspect it really simply sounded foreign (indeed, most of my Philippine friends thought it an odd name), leaving him to gender it himself. Mr., Mrs., Miss, and maybe even Ms.—which to pick? Given what he knew of me, no doubt the first seemed most logical—so much so, in fact, that he didn't even consider women coming through customs. He knew this Claussen per-

son was here for research, on a grant, without family in tow; that in and of itself suggested masculinity.

Not that Philippine women don't go abroad, of course. Many serve as overseas contract workers employed primarily in domestic service (Constable 1997) and what is all too euphemistically termed the entertainment business. Filipina professionals travel, too, for purposes of business, politics, vacation, or even, recalling my own intentions, education. Still, most such excursions are economically and familially motivated. Leaving home by choice rather than need—and in pursuit of a higher degree—rendered me suspect. What sort of woman was I to prioritize fieldwork over marriage and motherhood, especially at the late age of twenty-six? By Philippine standards, I was too old to be single yet too young to be engaged in serious academic scholarship. Just as it was hard for many of my informants' parents to believe their daughters would rather pursue a religious vocation than dedicate themselves to raising a family, it was hard for many Filipinos to believe I was really more interested in conducting research than in acquiring the spouse and children who would justify my existence as a woman.

NATURALIZING GENDERED DIFFERENCE

Many of my Filipino friends and acquaintances persisted in reading my presence not so much in terms of my ethnographic intentions but in terms of their own interest in seeing me married, too. Several made at least half-serious offers to help me find a husband in the Philippines. Moreover, to my great consternation, a male professor who invited me to sit in on some of his introductory St. Scholastica's College theology classes not only configured our acquaintance as romantic but also appropriated my person in order to illustrate and even legitimate widespread Philippine gender stereotypes—in a move, perhaps, to render my possibly threatening academic interests more manageable by representing (or misrepresenting) me in terms of current cultural standards of femininity.

I initially met Ferdinand, a former seminarian, through one of the novices. And, when I told him about my work, he invited me to attend a series of lectures he was giving on "Biblical Anthropology" assuring me, as he had doubtless assured the sisters responsible for hiring him, that he was sympathetic to feminism. His teachings hardly forwarded the critique of current gender systems I perhaps naively expected, how-

ever. During one of his classes, consisting solely of female students, most of them only sixteen years old, he presented a module on “sexual beingness.” By way of illustration, he sketched two stick figures on the blackboard—scribbling “Ferdinand” under the one in pants and, much to my distress, “Heather” under the one in a dress. Every male, he then said, had something of the female in him, and vice versa, enabling the two to relate to one another. On the other hand, there were important differences between the sexes. Men, he explained to the class, were sexually aggressive because of their organs, which stuck out, pointing every which way. They were simply “ready for it” anytime, anywhere. This was their nature. Women, in contrast, were sexually submissive because their organs did not stick out but were receptive. Thus, he continued, ignoring the ironies of the *querida* (mistress) system in the Philippines, marriage and monogamy were really institutions benefiting women.

If I was skeptical, though, Ferdinand justified such assertions with reference to a recent movie outing, during which, he said, the audience had given him another show. The man in front of him had been very sexually aggressive, while his female companion protested, “Huwag, huwag” (“Don’t, don’t”). “Like this,” he added, coyly squeaking, “No, no” in caricatured imitation of a woman pushing a man away—then, still saying “huwag, huwag”, bringing his arms and even one leg up around an imaginary partner as if to illustrate the woman’s actual collusion in a feigned embrace. Thereupon, he asked one of his students to stand up. When she dutifully made her way to the front of the room, he put his arms around her, she blushed, and he claimed her high color proved her timidity, sensitivity, and sexual passivity, while his own actions proved male assertiveness.

In fact of course, Ferdinand’s stagecraft was more persuasive of the cultural value placed on female virginity and the ironically simultaneous male dismissal of female objections than of any innate difference in male and female sexuality. But the message he was sending to his probably impressionable and inexperienced first-year students was disturbing. In essence, he was telling them that women should be coy and should not be sexually aggressive while simultaneously making it clear that he, at least, wouldn’t desist if told “No,” because he would simply read such protestation as artifice.

I was equally distressed at Ferdinand’s students’ acquiescence, though. None of them suggested they themselves might mean it when saying “Huwag.” None of them questioned the implicit directive not only to avoid acting interested in sex but also to tolerate male sexual

aggression and male infidelity alike as biological givens. Nor did any of them protest what appeared to me to constitute forms of sexual harassment—embraces, comments about appearance, and so on (notably, he later complained that St. Scholastica’s new harassment policy meant he could no longer kiss his students on their birthdays). Rather, they laughed at his dramatizations, dutifully copied down his words, and meekly submitted to his actions and his interpretations of gender—ironically conforming to (and probably, in his eyes, confirming) his assumptions in their very failure to object to the same.

After all, Ferdinand presumed women less assertive than men not only inside, but also outside, the bedroom. Moreover, he claimed men “naturally” less sensitive than women and “naturally” inclined to express love only periodically. Women, in contrast, were always in need of reassurance, asking their boyfriends, “Do you love me?” then, “*Talaga ba yon?*” (“Is that really true?”), then immediately after, on the phone, “*Talaga*, so you love me?” While such scripts are more a matter of social conditioning than biological determinism, reflecting quite possibly reasonable female insecurities about male fidelity in the Philippines, the fact that the class found the skit both familiar and humorous only appeared to strengthen Ferdinand’s belief in the validity of his theories.

He argued, too that men were rational creatures governed by the “head” and that women were emotional creatures governed by the “heart.” On the other hand, he said, women matured faster, explaining why most single parents in the Philippines were female and more generally why women were more responsible about both their children and their domestic duties.¹¹ And, again, no one challenged him. No one suggested that the single-mother phenomenon might have more to do with a cultural double standard encouraging male infidelity than with “natural” female responsibility; no one questioned why Filipinas are assigned primary responsibility for housework. Rather, most of the class again appeared to take Ferdinand’s word for it.

DOMESTIC(ATED) WOMEN AND WILD MEN

The fact that Ferdinand’s analyses apparently matched many of his students’ presuppositions should not be surprising, either; after all, he was reiterating already familiar cultural stereotypes. Hollnsteiner’s findings, for example, suggest that “Filipino men expect women to be better than they are” (Aquino 1985, 324), at least in terms of moral rec-

titude. On the other hand—as Ferdinand suggested, women are simultaneously presumed less rational than their male counterparts and less able to manage independently. Men, in contrast, are widely believed not only “naturally” more intelligent and better at decision making than their female counterparts but also less law-abiding (hence the hypocrisy of male priests with mistresses exhorting mostly female audiences to remain faithful, as one of the sisters observed).

And while the Missionary Benedictines have made a profession out of internalized cultural expectations of moral betterness, such gendered assumptions about innate character remain obstructive to female independence of thought and action. In part, such stereotypes render defying paternal wishes especially difficult for girls, already subject to more restrictive rules and regulations than young boys. Although obedience is demanded of children in general, male disobedience is much more likely to be accommodated or allowed than female disobedience because males are quite simply always already understood to be more independent and unruly than females.

The assumption that women are less likely to be able to care for themselves also means Philippine parents (particularly in urban and middle- or upper-class households) often more or less confine their daughters to the home while allowing their sons to roam far afield. Sister Josephine’s brothers, for example, were permitted the run of the *barangay*, even though their boy games were apt to cause trouble. Her father was “a little bit looser with the boys. . . . They could get away with some things we were not allowed to. Like, I couldn’t ride a bike myself. . . . That was for the boys.” Nor were the girls allowed to attend social functions without chaperones and strict instructions to be home on time, while her brothers could and did go out alone. Her brothers were allowed to complete their education in Manila, too, while Sister Josephine and her sisters were denied permission to attend school in the metropolis.

Likewise, such differentially gendered regulation of movement was evident in the Seth household. Although already nineteen, Kunthi, the oldest and only female of the three Seth children, hardly ever ventured beyond the complex gates outside of school hours. She was forbidden to date due the imagined threat such activity would pose to her virginity and reputation, and she wasn’t even allowed to go out with female friends without definite assurance of the presence of a trusted older chaperone. Beyond occasional secret and illegitimate excursions (such as skipping school to visit a local mall, where she was discovered and duly reprimanded by a horrified family friend), then, Kunthi whiled

away her free hours in her upstairs room reading Harlequin novels she kept hidden from her father in the loose boards of the ceiling above her bed.

Yet while Kunthi's life amounted to little more than a series of small and rather ineffectual transgressions of the limits imposed by her parents, with only imaginary adventures to feed her dreams with probably unrealistic hopes of romantic salvation, her brothers could pursue real adventures in the streets of Manila. At seventeen, Raja had regular access to the family's "best car," while his mother drove the only alternative, a rickety jeep. Moreover, on New Year's Eve, a traditional family night in the Philippines, he was permitted to go off partying with his friends with no paternal complaint beyond sighs of "boys will be boys." And Arjun, his thirteen-year-old brother, was encouraged to explore the neighborhood on his own, running errands for his mother and socializing at will with other *barangay* residents.

SOMETHING TO LOSE

Nor is such differential treatment just about differentially gendered (and self-reinforcing) assessments of worldly know-how. Many Filipinos also presume women in real need of protection from males, who are believed naturally aggressive and thus apt to spontaneously succumb to powerful urges of lust and violence rendering the world outside the domestic sphere a dangerous place. According to Philippine cultural logic, women are particularly vulnerable to such aggression because, as Sister Josephine's father euphemistically put it in attempting to justify his daughters' confinement, women, unlike men, have "something to lose." While the sister confessed to having been bewildered by this vague pronouncement for quite some time, she made sure I understood her father was really talking about female virginity, "something" granted great importance and cast in terms of potential loss and conquest in much of the Catholic (and again, particularly urban and middle- to upper-class) Philippines.¹²

Indeed, Sister Josephine's father's use of such rhetoric indexes the degree to which Filipino notions of manhood and womanhood are attached to different and differently morally valued assumptions about male and female sexuality. As already suggested by Ferdinand's discourse, male promiscuity is culturally encouraged by the belief that men are natural sexual aggressors, and Filipino men are expected to prove their masculinity by pursuing numerous female conquests and

responding to women as sex objects, even in the face of strong negative signals. On the other hand, Filipinas are at one and the same time expected to remain virgins and configured as tempresses, simultaneously charged with guarding themselves from male advances, presumed coy if unwilling to readily submit to male sexual desire, and all too often blamed in cases of sexual violence.

THE *QUERIDA* SYSTEM

Such strong sexual double standards ultimately play into the aforementioned *querida* system, too. While by no means all Philippine husbands cheat on their wives (and many Filipino marriages are mutually fulfilling), Filipinos themselves often speak of *queridas* as a characteristic, identifiable aspect of Philippine social life: male infidelity is a familiar enough national phenomenon to warrant widespread cultural recognition. In fact, Sister Josephine's father's concerns about preserving his daughters' virginity might be attributed, in part, to his own promiscuity. When he died, the sister wryly observed, many people came to the funeral—many of whom the immediate family didn't know and many of whom were undoubtedly related to him through assorted illicit affairs.

Mrs. Seth certainly complained of husbandly philandering, too, while my friends Tita Em and Vera bewailed their husbands' mistresses, worrying about venereal disease and obsessing over their spouses' daily schedules. None felt free to take their own lovers, though, else, they told me, their husbands would kill them. Nor were any of them seriously planning on leaving, partly because divorce is illegal in the Philippines, partly because of cultural and religious exhortations to female fidelity, and partly, doubtless, because the *querida* system is so much taken for granted in the Philippines that, however much pain it may cause, women may not feel mistresses sufficient justification for separation. After all, many key public figures in the Philippines have been quite open about their mistresses. Former President Fidel Ramos's *querida* routinely came up in media reports during the tenure of my fieldwork, for example. Likewise, former President Joseph Estrada has been linked to three mistresses and is well known to have had seven children out of wedlock. Such allegations are not politically damaging, as *queridas* are in many senses seen more as symbols of male status than as signs of corruption in the republic.¹³

Indeed, such examples underline the importance of proven sexual

prowess to masculinity in the Philippines, as one of my informants, an adolescent boy, made quite clear with obviously exaggerated claims to more than twenty girlfriends. The sisters were not always immune to such cultural training, either: while showing me pictures of her nieces and nephews, Sister Josephine observed that the twin boys, who looked about eight years of age, already had girlfriends. This, her amused tone suggested, was no surprise, although their older sisters' interest in boys was cause for much more concern. Likewise, while Mrs. Seth didn't let Kunthi date, she actively and recurrently teased her youngest son about girls, ironically and perhaps unfortunately reproducing just the sorts of gendered behaviors rendering her own life so unhappy. She would actually ask Arjun, in my presence, whether or not he found me "pretty," while proudly announcing his intentions to marry multiple women when he got older: one American, one Filipino, one Indian, and so on.

MALAKAS AND MAGANDA

Philippine women, on the other hand, are early on charged with the difficult task of manipulating their sexuality in order to attract, but not prematurely "lose anything" to the legitimate male attention ironically deemed necessary to secure their well-being and validate their womanhood. While female promiscuity is strongly discouraged, girls are taught that beauty matters. Indeed, beauty arguably has greater economic consequences for Filipinas than does education or past experience: "You can't be a saleslady if you're not pretty or tall even if you're a college graduate" (Lubi and Tujan 1993, 30). The Philippine tourist board advertises Filipina beauty as a key attraction, too, and Filipina participation in beauty contests is widespread.¹⁴ Blanc-Szanton (1990) further observes that female sexuality is not only commodified within the sex trade, but also continues to be objectified (and presented as sinful) by the national media. Moreover, appearance, at least that of women, is routinely a matter for public commentary. Women deemed insufficiently fashionable are often criticized, while attractive women may find favor purely on the basis of their looks. And, again, all of this starts young—even Sister Josephine's youngest nieces played at dressing up in fancy clothes and giving one another pretend shampoo jobs culminating in admiring comments, while the adolescent girls worried at length about what to wear outside the house.

Admittedly, many modern day Filipina feminists are critical of such

cultural emphasis on female beauty (and sexuality), faulting the Hispanicization of the Philippines. Indeed, under Spanish rule, femininity began to be configured in terms of beauty, grace, passivity, obedience, self-sacrifice, family love, cleanliness, and so on, ideals particularly promoted by the Church and later further popularized by Rizal's portrayal of Maria Clara (Aquino 1985; Jayawardena 1986; Mananzan 1992). The Spanish brought the *querida* system to the Philippines, too; moreover, under the colonial government, Filipinas lost their property rights, were denied access to public offices (aside from teaching), were prohibited from economic activity without spousal consent, and were forbidden divorce. In addition, peasant women forced to participate in the labor force were relegated to an inferior position vis-à-vis male laborers insofar as women were newly defined primarily as politically and economically inactive, "nonproductive," dependent, domestic workers (Jayawardena 1986; see also Blanc-Szanton 1990 on the history of the construction of gender in the lowland Visayas).¹⁵

The processes of modernization might also be blamed for the commodification of female beauty on a global market.¹⁶ After all, both the Philippine sex trade and the country's mail-order-bride industry (both exploitative of women) depend, in many ways, on the mythologization of Filipina sex appeal. On the other hand, one of the better-known Philippine legends suggests that the equation of womanhood and beauty may date back to precolonial times. Not that I would have thought to bring up Malakas and Maganda had not Sister Josephine informed me, the first time we met, that she wasn't really born of human parents. "No!" added the eavesdropping Sister Bertha, "you were born out of bamboo!" Then both nuns laughed, twinkle-eyed; they would give me something exciting to write about after all. Nor is the joke insignificant: the sisters were in fact referencing a well-known Philippine genesis story. At the beginning of time, so it's said, the land breeze and the sea breeze gave birth to a bamboo. When pecked by an angry bird, the bamboo split to reveal the first man, Malakas ("strong"), and the first woman, Maganda ("beautiful").

Of course, looking good is hardly important within the convent. Yet the legend is perhaps relevant precisely in its irrelevance. While the nuns locate their own identity in spirituality and action rather than appearance, many of the sisters remain very much concerned with their womanhood. For Sister Josephine, then, joking about having been born of bamboo may signify an attempt of sorts to reclaim the myth, establishing the validity of an alternative model of Philippine womanhood, not to mention an alternative definition of *maganda* itself

as something more interior than exterior. Insofar as she could claim to be on par with the original Filipina, even in jest, she was indexing both the need to revise and possibility of rewriting prototypical femaleness.

Something else was at issue here, too, though. As discussed earlier, birth parents often view their daughters' vocation as filial betrayal. By claiming to be born of bamboo, however, Sister Josephine was putting a new twist on the "sacrifice" of family. The transformation to sisterhood is configured here not so much in terms of loss or abandonment as in terms of rebirth—a miraculous sort of rebirth of the soul and person, if not the flesh; a rebirth, moreover, with both appellatory ramifications and a mythological precedent. Like the first woman, born of bamboo, the sister was now "parentless" by supernatural ordination.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

On the other hand, if reborn as nuns with filial allegiance to God, many of my informants emphasized the importance of paternal influences on their lives. While most admitted that their mothers' had provided far more significant vocational support and acceptance—indexing, perhaps, a more flexible situation-specific morality, not to mention an experiential understanding of the limitations entailed by motherhood and wifehood within the Philippines—many of the sisters simultaneously claimed closer identification with their fathers.

Sister Virginia, for example, claimed both to have been inspired by her father's political activism and to have had a special relationship with him, rendering her entry particularly emotionally difficult for him. Likewise, Sister Micha looked up her father as a life model. And Sister Josephine explicitly admitted to paternal identification. Showing me a photograph of her parents standing together several years into their marriage, she not only expressed dismay that her mother had already had seven children by the time it was taken but also proudly pointed out her resemblance to her father. "I am my father's daughter," she announced, adding that she took after him in personality and politics as well as appearance and that she had been his favorite.

PLAYING BOY GAMES

It wasn't just that many of my informants personally identified with their fathers, however; many also confessed to having enjoyed "boy

games” more than “girl games” when young. Although Philippine girls are encouraged to play at womanhood through the simulation or imitation of domestic chores, mothering, or personal beautification, many of the sisters crossed such gender lines as children. Sister Micha, for example, said she was a tomboy. And while Sister Josephine’s childhood was obviously highly regulated by gender, she ran off to play with her brothers whenever possible. Envious of their freedom, she not only harbored a secret sometime wish to be a boy but also tagged along with them whenever they let her, even though doing so usually meant running errands for them. Despite her subordinate status and her brothers’ arguable misuse of their gendered and generational power, the sister enjoyed such sessions precisely because they did things girls normally couldn’t or wouldn’t do.

For example, she whispered conspiratorially, they would steal! They’d say it wasn’t stealing because a tree branch would fall over into their yard. A well-socialized Catholic Philippine girl, Sister Josephine would object that the fruit was off-limits because borne from a neighbor’s tree. But the boys would take it anyway, pointing appropriatively to the position of the branch at issue. Nor did they stop at fruit; they also tried catching the chickens running around their *barangay*, employing the same logic: chickens that came onto their property and into their covetous hands were theirs. And, notwithstanding the sister’s ethical concerns, such games clearly gave her a thrill. With her brothers, she was afforded a freedom both to transgress the dogmatism of her own church-indoctrinated morality and to consider possibilities beyond the domestic. Playing with the boys meant the exploration of the traditionally forbidden, arguably foreshadowing her unorthodox vocation.

Likewise, the highly responsible and remarkably self-contained subprioress favored “boy games” when young. Claiming to have been a “very atypical girl,” Sister Mary Peter confessed that she spent her childhood playing with her two older brothers. She loved running, climbing trees, playing hide-and-seek, and even engaging in war games with them. Not that her mother was entirely happy with this. Although a strong and independent woman herself, her mother was concerned that Sister Mary Peter “wasn’t so feminine” and tried encouraging a more traditional girlhood with gifts of dolls, a doll cradle, and a playhouse with little pots. Still, the sister preferred roaming around outside and told me she was grateful that her mother hadn’t completely prohibited such adventuring.

Such tomboy tales should not be surprising either. In many ways, the

Missionary Benedictine life might be seen as the logical outcome of the boy games the sisters played when young. As nuns, my informants are afforded a good deal of independence, significant educational opportunities, and the chance to engage in meaningful political, social, and religious work not only across the Philippines but also around the globe. In short, the convent seems an ideal choice for Filipinas raised on dreams of adventure rather than of marriage and maternity.

WHAT MAKES A WOMAN?

Given such subversion of traditional Filipina socialization, however, how do the sisters understand their womanhood? One might imagine the Missionary Benedictines as asexual, androgynous creatures. After all, while being a woman is prerequisite to becoming a nun, becoming a nun entails the use of the female body in ways largely independent of the reproductive organs. Nevertheless, gender remains of central concern to the sisters. Indeed, while the convent has afforded my informants freedom from cultural pressures to adopt particular forms of femininity, it has also presented them with new problems of gender identification.

Consider a rather surprising comment Sister Josephine made while discussing prayer, for instance. Observing that the Missionary Benedictines normally kneel at their pews in front of the altar during their formal, scheduled, prayer sessions, the sister confessed that she “used to sit in the Zen position” when praying in her own quarters on her own time. Unfortunately, however, she could no longer do this. Why not? Because, the sister exclaimed, she was now “a boy.”

A boy?! Surely not—we had just been talking about the dynamics of life in a woman-only, childless community. But, Sister Josephine explained, she had had surgery to remove her reproductive system. She had had irregular periods her entire life but hadn’t known why until, at age forty-three, she went to the hospital for food poisoning and a tumor was discovered. So, her gynecologist gave her a hysterectomy, or what she termed a “cesarean.” And it had been such a joke! The other sisters teased her about the operation. They told her they would have to baptize and christen the mass, playfully conferring maternity on her precisely upon the removal of her biological capacity for bearing children. All at once, she became symbolically both “virgin mother” and “male.”

Not, of course, that Sister Josephine really believed herself either one. Nevertheless, the loss of one of the primary biological markers of

her womanhood ironically afforded her an opportunity to simultaneously play Mary and Christ, appropriating spiritual power in the face of the very signs of mortality. The “Cesarean” wasn’t just a medical affair; rather, it both confirmed her womanhood (she had reproductive organs to remove) and symbolically inscribed the ambiguity of her very position as a nun on her body itself. Having had the surgery, she was but wasn’t a woman, was but wasn’t a boy, and was but wasn’t both Madonna and child—all testifying not only to the complications of Filipina sisterhood but also to the Missionary Benedictines’ highly personal interest in creatively renegotiating gender within the Philippine context. Sister Josephine’s “Cesarean” underlines the difficulty femaleness presents for the nuns—what does it mean to be a woman in the Philippines when celibate and childless?

MISTER SISTER

Nor was Sister Josephine the only one of my informants to play at crossing gender lines. Sister Micha confessed to having been tagged “macho” by her peers in formation. She not only performed male parts in the novitiate programs but also more generally consciously played at being “masculine.” “Masculinity,” she explained, was often equated with aggressiveness or authoritativeness and was indicated by a certain stance, a certain way of walking, in the Philippines. Thus, she practiced presenting herself with self-confidence and began making broad gestures and flinging her limbs about rather than containing her movements in “feminine” modesty.

After a while, though, the charade grew old, and she began attempting to act a woman, instead. Moreover, her focus was again behavioral: she again began making conscious efforts to transform her speech and carriage, taking her cue from one of the other novices, a former belly dancer. The woman walked in a very “feminine” way, “Like this!” the sister demonstrated, swaying her hips back and forth in a decidedly provocative manner.

When Sister Micha tried imitating the walk, however, everyone laughed and called her *bakla*. Admittedly, the comment was made in fun and in appreciation of her obvious interest in and skill at performance. But the tag was also oddly jarring because quite literally inappropriate to her gender. The term *bakla* is usually used in reference to men who act “feminine,” often in exaggerated fashion. *Baklas* often engage in cross-dressing and sometimes are transgendered, identifying

as or desirous of being women. Many also engage in sexual intercourse with other men and might be termed “gay” by Western standards, although, in most cases, their male partners still define themselves as “straight” and perceive their *bakla* paramours as female equivalents. While the *bakla* arguably represents a third gender or “third sex” within the Philippine context, though, it remains a gender option typically only open to “effeminate” males (Cannell 1999; Johnson 1997; Manalansan 1995).

Indeed, there are no equivalent culturally elaborated (and hence culturally legitimated) alternatives for masculine women.¹⁷ Sister Micha’s peers doubtless resorted to the label *bakla* for lack of any more exact means of tagging the ambiguous (and obviously fluid) nature of her gender identity. Of course, being *bakla* stereotypically implies stagecraft, too—in the Philippines, the term calls to mind extravagant beauty contests, highly glamorous dress, and hyperfemininity (Cannell 1999; Johnson 1997). In consciously exaggerating popular cultural representations of both femininity and masculinity, Sister Micha was not only providing entertainment for her peers (an important thing in the Philippines) but also, like the *bakla*, effectively underlining the artificial, performative, nature of such categories.¹⁸ The sister’s ability to persuasively act a man, although a woman—and even more persuasively act a man than a woman—exposes the degree to which Philippine assessments of femininity or masculinity depend on negotiable and learned behaviors, themselves open to manipulation and reversal in a somewhat ironic unveiling of more typically mystified and naturalized cultural systems of meaning.

While it is suggestive to read Sister Micha’s postulancy as an exercise in the cultural deconstruction of gender and sex from the inside, however, it is also important to recognize that Sister Micha was playing with her own identity, with high emotional stakes. I was thus all ears when she asked me if I wanted to know “what really made her a woman.” She had befriended the priest serving as her retreat master during a process retreat, an intensive, highly personalized, eight-day, one-on-one affair required annually of all Missionary Benedictines. As her processor, he was responsible for helping her confront herself, adjust to her religious vocation, and achieve “psychospiritual integration.” He was a good psychologist, too; he encouraged her to talk openly. So the sister told him about her gender trouble. And his response surprised her—he said he found her very feminine. No one had ever said such a thing to her before, and the comment made all the difference. For the first time in her life, she realized that being assertive or opinionated simply meant

being strong, not being “masculine.” Finally, she felt affirmed as a woman. Nor did the transformation go unnoticed: although she didn’t consciously change her behavior, people stopped calling her macho and *bakla*.

NUN NAMES RECONSIDERED

Such struggles with identity reflect back on the sisters’ appellatory choices, too. While my informants’ names signify conciliation, they also signify self-affirmation and self-empowerment, simultaneously serving to apologize for and to celebrate the radical decision to enter the convent.

Recall, for example, Sister Micha’s operator story. While the sister explains the switch from *Michael* to an abbreviated form in terms of telephone efficiency, operator confusion hardly seems sufficient justification for the change. There are many other ways to avoid such mixed signals, and she lacked neither the intelligence to think of alternative solutions nor the good humor to enjoy befuddling unsuspecting listeners. And it is significant that the name *Micha* is a unique, highly personalized, creative, and feminized version of the original. For all the sister’s talk of honoring a recalcitrant father—and for all her gender play across misterhood and sisterhood—her ultimate choice to call herself “Micha” arguably represents a means of reclaiming the appellation (and her identity) for herself. As the first Philippine *Micha*, she doesn’t have to follow in anybody’s footsteps or worry about the ambiguities of her gendered position. If she is both her father’s daughter and Christ’s bride, she is also her own woman.

Likewise, Sister Virginia’s name not only represents a conciliatory gesture to an unhappy father but also carries personal, private significance. In the course of explaining the Marian nature of the rosary to me, she told me she really first came to an understanding of her faith while working with the Legion of Mary, an organization of religious youth. When assigned to pick up presentation medals for the feast day of the Virgin of Lourdes, her jeepney was sideswiped by another car in a near-fatal hit-and-run accident. She almost died, and she hadn’t been able to remember what had happened when she finally came to in the hospital. Indeed, everyone assured her that it was a miracle she had survived at all—never mind the money she had been carrying, which had been scattered on the streets around her. She had been found clutching her rosary tightly to her breast, though. And,

while she hadn't really recognized the full importance of the Virgin before the accident, she gained new insight into the Virgin's power in the wake of the crash. She felt that Mary was telling her something—particularly given the fact that the whole thing happened on February 10, St. Scholastica's feast day. It was as if she was meant to be Missionary Benedictine.

Her choice of *Virginia* as a religious name makes sense, then, not only as a filial gesture of reconciliation but also as testimony to the transformative power of her experience. It not only indexes her daughterly affection in the face of painful paternal disapproval but also recalls her first real experience of intense faith and her first inkling of having been “destined for the convent.” Moreover, it testifies to the extent to which the sisterhood affords its members the opportunity to “remake themselves” into new women.

The Making of the Missionary Benedictines

If taking up the religious vocation as a Missionary Benedictine already represents a radical move, formation, a matter of voluntary resocialization, encourages further sociocultural radicalization. As intimated earlier, though, convent life isn't for everyone. And not everyone makes it through formation. During Sister Micha's, time, for example, the casualties were numerous. She entered with seven others, but only two of them made their first profession. Three left on their own initiative. The others, one a good friend of the sister's, were "made" to realize that they wouldn't be able to cope due to "character issues."

After all, Sister Micha explained, much of formation is a matter of working through personal hang-ups under the guidance of the formation superiors, who are ultimately responsible for weeding out candidates lacking the psychological makeup to become Missionary Benedictine. Nor is it always obvious who will and won't make it. Usually, all sorts of different personalities are represented during the postulancy, and almost everyone needs at least some help in the transformation process. It is very intense, with little room for blaming mistakes on anyone or anything but oneself. One really has to take a hard look at both one's strengths and weaknesses in the absence of outside distractions to hide behind.

And Sister Micha admitted to having had her own share of personal quirks. For example, she had had difficulties with silence. She was "a natural talker," and, when she first entered, she hadn't been able to keep quiet after 10:00 P.M. in accordance with convent rules. In fact, early on, she decided to drop out because of it. But her superiors asked her to wait a few months, and the problem resolved itself once she began to understand inner silence—not to mention the importance of listening to others.

For her, then, formation was successful. But her friend, who had very

much wanted to remain within the convent, hadn't been so fortunate. The novice mistress felt the candidate was too set in her ways and wanted her out. And all Sister Micha could offer by way of comfort was a shoulder to cry on. But perhaps God intended her to play that role. After all, it had been very difficult for her friend to distance herself from the whole thing—partly, no doubt, because this was already her second try. Having left after entering ten years earlier, the woman had been sure she'd be able to make it this time around.

Of course, the veil hadn't made it any easier to leave.¹ In the veil, Sister Micha explained, one already felt like a professed sister. And, in the early 1980s, canonical novices already received veils, albeit without the blessing. In fact, the postulants, who wore simple white blouses and blue skirts, had been the only ones not in habit. Now, though, novices also wear white blouses and blue skirts (with blue ties and tucked-in tops to mark their graduation from the postulancy), making the transition back to lay life a bit less dramatic for entrants pushed out.

The Missionary Benedictines are now more selective about the candidates they accept, too. Previously, a good many applicants were admitted at once, without much close interrogation. Now, however, the sisters are spending more time on the screening process, resulting in a noticeable reduction in their postulant and novice dropout rates. While fewer entrants on average are accepted, more are staying in: the sisters joke that now there is quality instead of quantity.

POSTULANT PREREQUISITES

How is applicant potential assessed, though? Sister Virginia herself admitted this could be difficult—notwithstanding her self-proclaimed intuitive abilities. After all, interested women themselves don't always know for sure whether or not they have a vocation for quite some time. Some think they do, but their interest in the congregation is really about other life problems. Some, on the other hand, don't start off imagining themselves in the convent but eventually realize that they really do want to follow Christ by serving others.

The Missionary Benedictines also maintain certain standards. For one thing, education is important; like many other Philippine congregations, the sisterhood requires at least four years of postgraduate schooling (or the equivalent) of all applicants. Moreover, entry is contingent upon at least two years of prior work experience, like Sister Josephine's teaching or Sister Micha's stint as a chemical engineer.

Such worldliness is deemed desirable because it both insures the ability to negotiate alternatives and guarantees that entry represents a conscious decision made with an understanding of other possibilities.

There are other prerequisites, too. For example, all applicants are required to complete a physical exam before entering: although convent work is not unduly taxing, being a sister does require stamina (many sisters get only a few hours of sleep per night, and most have to be able to walk considerable distances in the course of at least some of their convent assignments), the ability to manage a certain amount of basic physical (and particularly domestic) labor, and general bodily discipline.

Furthermore, as Sister Micha gleefully announced during one of the searches in, the congregation prefers entrants with prior romantic experience. Not that the nuns automatically turn away women without such experience. Nor do they expect candidates to have engaged in sexual intercourse—far from it. Nevertheless, the Missionary Benedictine brochures encourage prospectives to take the time to get to know “several nice boys” while contemplating the advisability of a religious vocation precisely in order to better decide whether or not God might be the “Number One Love” of their lives. Women with experience, the ever controversial Sister Micha assured us, are better able to successfully deal with being celibate; otherwise, the vow to chastity isn’t as meaningful and the “what if” of sexual and emotional intimacy is harder to get past.

ADVANCING TO ASPIRANCY

Even that isn’t all, though. As intimated earlier, serious candidates are expected to regularly attend searches in, make multiple and often overnight visits to various congregation houses, and participate in convent retreats. In addition, applicants have to pass a battery of tests before being admitted as aspirants. Indeed, as someone long involved in vocation and formation work, Sister Mary Peter told me the exams were often very revealing.² To begin with, prospectives are asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire concerning personality, past experience, and family relationships. Next, candidates take what is essentially an IQ test, modeled on IQ tests used in the United States. According to Sister Mary Peter, the congregation doesn’t want “dull people” who might have a hard time managing convent assignments, getting along with other community members, and grasping the true

essence of the religious life. After all, she observed, every sister ultimately has to be able to implement the congregation's values and mission herself in positions of significant responsibility. Every sister has to be able to think for herself, make moral judgments for herself, and anticipate the consequences of her actions.

Of course, the degree to which the test really measures intelligence is questionable. In fact, the use of IQ tests developed in the United States and administered in English favors women with greater cultural familiarity with the West—in other words, cosmopolitan, wealthy Filipinas with greater access to the world of international exchange than their poorer and more rural counterparts. Nor are all the sisters happy about such testing. Sister Micha, for example, told me about a Bacolod catechist she had thought good convent material. Although very poor, the woman exhibited confidence, strength of character, and the ambition to make something of herself; moreover, she developed a parish program of study remarkably similar to the modules used in formation. So as Bacolod vocation promoter, the sister recommended her for the exams. But the catechist failed, a fact Sister Micha attributed to her lack of familiarity with the English language.

Admittedly, the woman also did poorly on the second, projective, set of exams during which candidates are asked to complete sentences, write about themselves, and take an MMPI multiphasic personality test, all in order to assess prospectives' ability to make sacrifices for the greater good, obey superiors, and successfully live in community. Successful applicants must demonstrate what Sister Mary Peter termed a "strong sense of self," must be psychologically stable, and must be free of "major personality blocks." And this is where things got sticky for the Bacolod catechist. She confessed not only to having been raped by her uncle but also to having taken it upon herself to threaten him with death by her own hand should he touch her or her younger cousins again. Unfortunately, none of this sat well with the rather conservative sister administering the exam—who, in Sister Micha's opinion, exhibited unusual rigidity in claiming such childhood trauma an insurmountable obstacle to successful sisterhood.

Prospectives who pass the tests, on the other hand, commence an intensive period of aspirancy. At this point, candidates are individually invited to stay at one of the congregation's community houses, typically at some distance from their home environment, for one to six months. Here, they are given the opportunity to participate in the community's apostolate and prayers. This not only gives interested prospectives the chance to get a good taste of the Missionary Benedictine life before

finally committing to it, it also gives the nuns a chance to better assess how specific applicants might respond to the vocation in varied situations. Concrete behavior is at issue here: Is the aspirant considerate? Is she friendly? Is she on time for prayer? Is she willing to work hard? Can she effectively deal with diverse personalities?

The input of all host sisters on such counts is critical, and at times, Sister Mary Peter admitted, communities complain about applicant inflexibility or difficulties with obedience, for example. In such cases, aspirants are advised to take up another way of life. On the other hand, a collective entrance date is set for those aspirants to whom the congregation generally responds positively—usually ten to twenty per year, though the number can vary.

THE STAGES OF (DE)FORMATION

Upon successful negotiation of the aspirancy, entrants are asked to assemble various practical necessities (toothbrushes, underwear, and extra T-shirts) and important papers (baptismal certificates, college transcripts, certificates of medical clearance, and a formal, notarized, declaration of person and intent under oath) before relocating to Marikina, an hour or two away from Manila proper. Here, new initiates at last commence formation—or, as Sister Micha aptly put it, “de-formation.” Nor is it easy, as I learned during my own visits to the formation house.

My primary hostess in Marikina was Mona, a lively, bright-faced, bespectacled second-year novice who picked me up at the priory parlor one sunny morning amid a flurry of activity. This was the regular Marikina chauffeur, Mang Carlos, and she had to mail a package for Sister Gregory, and would I mind stopping in Cubao, at some distance from St. Scholastica’s, to fetch the canonical novices? As part of their training, they were taking classes from the Holy Spirit Sisters every Tuesday—along with over one hundred novices from other congregations, which, Mona observed with a bare hint of disapproval, meant a lot of revenue for the Holy Spirit Sisters, as they charged fifty pesos per person.

While I would have liked to know what the Holy Spirit Sisters were teaching for such money, however, we arrived at Cubao too late in the day to get much out of joining the others—eight of them in all, and all, they told me, hungry and tired and looking forward to both their lunch and afternoon siesta. Nor was Marikina ill suited to such activity.

Notwithstanding the faraway cries of schoolgirls from the associated Academy lingering in the air, the postulants and novices do not have to contend with the sort of chaos surrounding the priory grounds in Manila. Here, the initiation process is negotiated in highly controlled fashion, with the novices in the main house and the postulants in a newly constructed building next door, at a distance from both St. Scholastica's Academy (serving kinder through high school students) and the Marikina Community (composed of school faculty and administrators) at the other side of the complex. Indeed, entrant contact with such external influences is limited to weekday morning Masses at the school chapel and occasional school assignments.

Isolation of this sort, of course, is typical of group rites of passage across cultures, facilitating the manipulation of emotional allegiances and ideologies. And, for the Missionary Benedictines, the process begins with an often tearful ceremony at which new entrants bid their natal families good-bye. Moreover, during their yearlong postulancy, new initiates are stripped of many of the physical trappings and daily expectations decorating their past lives, encouraged to unlearn previous cultural assumptions, and introduced to new behavioral models.³ Such resocialization is accomplished through the practice of mandates to obedience, poverty, and chastity; through disciplinary schedules; and through the study of basic congregational texts and history under a nun expressly trained to do initial formation work.

Then, in their second year, postulants begin the novitiate. The first year of the novitiate proper is canonical; as required by canon law, canonical novices are cloistered inside as much as possible. They are confined to the grounds of Marikina, aside from official excursions outside for educational purposes or purposes of specifically religious celebration. What's more, while postulants are permitted to write letters home and allowed visits from family and friends on the third Sunday of every month, first-year novices must forgo such pleasures: communication with the outside world is forbidden. Indeed, canonical novices are subject to even stricter rules and regulations than those binding professed sisters, not only as part and parcel of a general attempt to break them of old and familiar habits but also to facilitate immersion in the congregation and its charism, or the "graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church" (Catholic Bishops' Conference 1994). In addition, the cloister affords entrants an opportunity to engage in intensive prayer with minimal outside distractions.

The shared experience of formation in the absence of other, external, sources of support not only renders congregation values all the

more compelling, however, but also fosters community feeling. Nor is this insignificant. For one thing, Sister Micha told me, one really got used to being solely with women. In other words, formation affords a viable alternative to a patriarchal family models wherein women are configured as dependents and men as protectors. Moreover, formation is intended to be persuasive of the possibility of a highly structured but in many respects mutually supportive and concerned collective wherein character and action (as judged according to Missionary Benedictine understandings of Christ and God) are of greater importance than appearance or material wealth.

After all, as Sister Virginia observed, while it is perfectly possible to serve God and others outside of the convent, part of the congregation's allure lies in the companionship of others harboring the same life ideals. The prospect of living in community, in fact, figured prominently in her own decision to enter the convent: she believed that living with other religious sisters would help her to further develop her faith. Likewise, Sister Josephine emphasized the importance of the collective:

The charism, what makes us Benedictine and is specific to us, is that we live in community under a superior. . . . Benedictine life is the balance of prayer and work, lived in community. It's lived in community always, [and] for us, the least number of members in a community would be four sisters. . . . The test, the challenge, and also the beauty of religious life for us Benedictines is community life, living together. . . . It's like if you're outside, you're not in the convent, you also have problems with relationships with your coworkers. . . . The edge over being outside is that inside, everyone is trying to do her best, is trying to be better every day. And we also have these very regular chances for reconciliation.⁴

Then, too, one of the congregation pamphlets states, "the point of the Christian life is not the service of the individual, rather it is a service in the context of a witnessing community. The very existence of that community and its communal service . . . bear witness to the tangible presence within the society of God's Kingdom of Love, justice and peace, the Kingdom that is already here and is not yet." Being Missionary Benedictine, for the sisters, thus amounts to more than the personal pursuit of salvation. It also signifies belief in and commitment to participation in a religious cooperative, both as present and future promise.

And, given that, life at Marikina is structured in a highly deliberate

attempt to encourage mutual love and consideration as well as poverty, obedience, and chastity. Indeed, congregation formators are chosen carefully with such goals in mind. The postulant and novice mistresses—in this case Sister Ambrose and Sister Gregory, respectively—are expected to serve as good examples and to resolve their own conflicts with others peacefully. Of course, the postulants and novices themselves are generally on their best behavior during formation, too, given the need to prove themselves fit for the vocation. All in all, then, Marikina serves as something of a model for the religious life; my informants in fact often referred to it as an “ideal community” and talked of the formators as “ideal sisters.” Nor is this trivial; such instances of successful Missionary Benedictinism are more generally persuasive of the possibility of utopia not only within but even beyond the convent walls, however necessary social reform may be to the realization of community perfection on a larger scale.

AN “IDEAL COMMUNITY”?

Of course, in actuality, the success of formation as an ideal ultimately meant to promote responsible sisterly activism depends quite strongly on the regulation of individual behavior during the postulancy and novitiate. In fact, life in formation is very much run by hours and minutes, notwithstanding sometime exceptions for celebratory or educational purposes. My first morning in Marikina, for example, began to the tune of the chapel bells at 4:50 A.M., allowing twenty minutes for showering and dressing before lauds in the formation house chapel. Lauds itself commenced with ten minutes of silence culminating in Sister Gregory’s sharp knuckle rap, the agreed upon signal to rise and sing the Lord’s praises, portions of which were chanted by those novices assigned to the part for the week, leaving the rest of us responsible for the psalm and hymn responsorials. Then, we relocated to the somewhat larger school chapel. Here, one of the various Jesuit, Benedictine, or other priests enlisted for the purpose by day of the week said Holy Mass for both the Missionary Benedictine formation and teaching communities, not to mention a scattering of students and faculty. Finally, the faithful lined up to take communion: the sisters first, then the novices, the postulants, and any visitors, row by row—all but me, although Mona repeatedly urged my participation because it was “supposed to be for all God’s people.” Didn’t it matter that I wasn’t even

baptized Catholic and had never gone through confirmation or gone to confession? Not to Mona: in her opinion, all that was important was whether or not I felt moved to participate in the Eucharist.⁵

Mona was gracious enough to hide her disappointment when I abdicated my place in line, though—and cheerfully engaged me in “meditative conversation” while showing me around the grounds over the thirty minutes of “silence” scheduled after mass. Next came breakfast—rice, fish, and mangoes—and then class with the formators from 8:30 to 9:30 A.M. After this, the morning’s chores had to be done: washing up, cutting vegetables in the kitchen, polishing the pews, arranging the liturgies, and shining the chapel floor with a coconut shell. Novices are assigned such menial duties on a rotating basis every weekday until 10:30, whereupon they take up other responsibilities—piano practice, book reading, homework, and so on. Indeed, such work represents their introduction to the Benedictine mandate to labor: although most nuns eventually receive jobs of a more administrative or educational nature, all Missionary Benedictines are supposed to be willing and able to do anything asked or needed of them. And the work is not just work: the idea is to find God or to feel oneself practicing a form of prayer while scrubbing dirty food off plates, chopping *kangkong* for communal meals, or dusting well-worn wooden benches.

In this case, reprieve from such “spiritual exercises” came at 11:45, with a bell calling everyone to midday prayer—meant, the sisters told me, to remind them to orient their attention toward God after reexamining their morning’s activities in light of their faith. After this, we all ate lunch, followed by siesta until 1:45, at which time the novices commenced an hour of theological studies. At 2:45, we took afternoon *merienda*—Skyflakes crackers, processed cheese, sticky rice confections, and local colas—and the novices scattered in pursuit of various individual assignments. The postulants, on the other hand, had a 4:00 class with Sister Ambrose, who announced that we would be discussing the saints’ martyrdom this afternoon: Did anyone wish to demonstrate? Had any of us been to Rome? No, no, she saw that look, not BEDrome!?! Seriously, though, the day’s lessons concerned the missal and the Missionary Benedictine Liturgy of Hours (LOH); at present, she told me, they were going through the list of commons, learning which were most important. All sisters are eventually expected to know the whole lot, beginning with Mary, then the apostles, then the saints, then the martyrs. There were also four liturgical cycles to learn, she informed us—and each entrant would ultimately have to construct her own liturgies with the use of various key texts kept in the chapel for that purpose.

The chapel books also provided material for silent meditation while waiting for the community as a whole to convene for evening prayer at 6:00. Vespers is in fact an important part of the sisters' daily schedule, affording them the opportunity to thank God for their day. Nor is going to vespers simply a matter of keeping to the hours and minutes of the prayer routine. As I soon discovered, it also entails learning to arrange the Missionary Benedictine LOH, the main text used by the congregation during all of its prayer sessions. The rather hefty tome contains locally selected versions of hymns and psalms for every day of the year. And preparing the book for easy reference during the process of praying requires learning the code used to designate particular selections. In this case, we looked to symbols chalked on a blackboard to the front of the room, marking our places in advance with the multicolored ribbons attached to every volume of the LOH. After all, while the vesper sequence is more or less set, the evening's psalms and reading were new.

Following vespers, dinner was served. And, as the novices were prohibited outside contact during the meal—in preparation for the dinnertime silence expected of fully professed sisters—I ate with the postulants. Afterwards, at 8:00, we attended compline, or as Sister Micha put it in fond recollection of how tired she often was by that time, “complain.” Of course, on Wednesdays and Sundays compline is combined with vespers in order to provide time for evening recreation—Scrabble, walking, talking, or even watching *America's Funniest Home Videos* on television.⁶ The novices have dance exercise every month, too; moreover, the first Sunday of each month is always set aside as a day of prayer and contemplation. This time, however, compline—essentially a fifteen-minute version of vespers intended to provide the sisters a chance to make their peace with God before retiring for the night—was followed by silent prayer until 9:00 P.M., at which point the novices returned to their cells, and I to bed.⁷

MARKING TIME

In many ways, such routinization of behavior and such scheduled periods of meditation within the cloister facilitate introspectivity. Whether or not young women entering the profession are self-aware to begin with, formation both trains them in and requires of them significant self-reflexivity. Entrants are both expected and provided ample space and time, here, to contemplate what it means to be Missionary Bene-

dictine and to ponder the degree to which they may or may not be suited to the vocation. What's more, in learning to interrogate self and faith during the postulancy and novitiate, new entrants learn the habit of interrogation as a general practice. While quite specifically educated to particular congregational values, they are simultaneously taught critical thinking and trained to use good judgment in applying the Missionary Benedictine charism to new and unforeseen situations.

The routine helps insure an ideal balance of prayer and work, too. Indeed, the daily schedule is given more importance during formation than at any other point in the sisterhood precisely because it is intended to teach this balance. Moreover, the routine is more possible at Marikina than elsewhere. Postulants and novices have few outside responsibilities—grading and sociopolitical crises don't interfere in their lives. Again, their world is quite insular and their survival needs are already met. Even their labor is directed more toward maintenance than necessity: their cleaning, laundry, school, and study duties are expressly designed to be easily contained within the strict convent timetables.

While the postulants and novices are on probation and must both learn and prove themselves able to keep the schedule, however, fully professed sisters are granted greater flexibility in light of their more complicated and varied assignments. It is acceptable to skip prayer to attend classes at De La Salle university, nap during evening recreation if feeling a bit too worn out, request home leave for family emergencies, go on retreat with little notice, or even take the anthropologist out to lunch instead of eating with the community—as long as it doesn't happen “too often.” Nor do most of the nuns abuse their freedom. Most generally keep to the prescribed routine, having internalized the mandate to keep their prayers and labor in balance, a mandate doubtless all the easier to follow precisely because breachable given the necessity.

And all of this is in many respects remarkable within the Philippine context. Time is managed quite loosely in the general course of secular life: few people keep count of minutes or even quarter hours in conducting their everyday business. The best of friends often keep one another waiting an hour or two or even three for prearranged dates. Moreover, official meetings and appointments, not to mention concerts, plays, and other performance pieces, rarely begin when scheduled to do so. Student tardiness to the point of barely making it to class appeared commonplace at SSC, too. Even work hours are often quite flexible: employees are often allowed by default to arrive and depart

when they want, as I discovered upon attempted visits to area doctors out on three-hour lunches and library officials not yet in by early afternoon. Nor do most Manileños respond to such instances of postponement or lateness with impatience; such things are taken in stride, with good-humored jokes about “Filipino time.”

The highly scheduled life of the Missionary Benedictines, then, represents a significant change of lifestyle for women raised with little experience of, and quite possibly little concern for, minute-by-minute scheduling. Learning to manage the exact timing of not only every prayer and work session but also the siesta, daily meals, and recreation entails a marked shift in perspective from that of the stereotypically “laid back” Filipino. Postulant or novice tardiness is not lightly excused, either. Indeed, promptness is prerequisite to graduation from the novitiate, and making it to full sisterhood necessitates successfully internalizing a culturally foreign valuation of time. Where spontaneity and impulse are accommodated in lay life, efficiency and behavioral control are the rule in the religious life, and being timely requires at least some degree of self-awareness and self-discipline.

Successful self-regulation is also taken as a sign of spiritual dedication and capacity within the Missionary Benedictine world, providing the nuns a sense of particular moral worth. In fact, the appeal of the religious life can be attributed in part to the degree to which the injunction to be timely and self-disciplined contrasts with secular laxity. Such dissimilarities render the convent experience all the more extraordinary. Were the boundaries between the Missionary Benedictines and their lay Filipina friends less clearly discernible in differences of dress, duty, and devotion, fewer young women might see any point in becoming nuns. After all, the viability of monastic congregations in many ways depends on the assumption that spirituality and lay life are radically disparate.

There is more to the convent routines than the proof and confirmation of a calling, though. While the temporal discipline required of the sisters constantly redirects Missionary Benedictine energy toward convent-defined goals, thereby perpetuating and maintaining institutionalized power in classical Foucauldian fashion, the extreme orderliness and regularity of convent life simultaneously affords entrants a means of self-empowerment. The sisters’ success in keeping to congregation schedules not only provides reaffirmation of their vocation but also indexes their ability to control their own lives. This is the education of the will, after all, if initially in subjugation to congregation rules and regulation.

Indeed, as discussed earlier, congregation life signifies the possibility of opting and even agitating for more informed and less culturally determined life choices. The fact that the Missionary Benedictine community provides a counterpoint and obvious contrast to the modes of being and thinking characteristic of lay existence means that it offers a potentially privileged vantage point from which a critique of lay existence may be developed. Admittedly, some nuns may rather blindly adopt convent conventions as a new truth, replacing former habits with their new habits with little thought about the implications of such behavioral shifts. Yet at the very least, taking up the vocation entails making a conscious choice to adopt values and practices divergent from Filipino norms. And this, in turn, requires at least some awareness of the culturally contingent nature of community attitudes. The sort of new disciplinary behavioral requirements at issue here are not simply imposed upon new entrants as an inexplicable directive but rather are subject to a good deal of philosophical justification and discussion alike. While the congregation's teachings are certainly highly biased, the congregation nevertheless encourages its members to consider the ethical implications of and the rationale for their actions: if the convent is rule bound, the convent's rules are themselves introduced to entrants (and were presented to me) as ideological and logical choices, amenable to alteration where and when necessary in the pursuit of larger and more abstract Missionary Benedictine imperatives.

RE-FORMATION

Even the organization of life at Marikina, although based on traditional conceptions of the stages of religious initiation, is open to revision: the postulancy and novitiate have been subject to numerous modifications in an effort to make the formative experience ever more relevant. Modern-day postulants and novices have more freedom than their historical counterparts, for example. When Sister Mary Peter was admitted to the congregation in the 1950s, new entrants were much more rigidly segregated from the fully professed nuns. The two groups were introduced to one another, could smile at one another, and saw one another at prayer and meals, but could not freely converse except on big feast days. Novices also resided in a different part of the house, where they had contact only with the two sisters responsible for them, the novice mistress and her assistant. The idea, Sister Mary Peter said, was to avoid confusing young entrants. It was felt at the time that "too many cooks

would spoil the meal.” Now, however, the Missionary Benedictines believe collective dialogue helpful and no longer forbid discussion among the postulants, novices, and fully professed sisters.

The nuns also now encourage entrants to commit to social activism as a religious responsibility, the outcome of a radical revision of congregational goals accomplished during Sister Micha’s tenure at Marikina. The sister entered in 1981, during the Marcos years. By that time, she told me, former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos had established his power base so well that even without martial law, his machinery worked. Civilians were arrested without warrants, the courts had no real authority, the Senate was locked out, and so on. And her formator had been into “the signs of the times.” Although the novitiate is traditionally cloistered, Sister Micha’s novice mistress had taken her charges outside the convent walls, partly at the urging of already professed sisters who had experienced military violence in the mid-1970s during a union strike.⁸ In the wake of such experiences, the entire community had begun talking about “integral spirituality” and “total human development,” the integration of prayer and action in support of social justice.

Admittedly, there had been tension between the minority “status quo sisters” and those who wanted to “get involved.” According to Sister Micha, the more conservative Missionary Benedictines—especially some of the older ones, who were comfortable with their life as it was—hadn’t been happy about the changes others of the nuns were introducing. Solidarity with the poor “wasn’t their job,” they protested. They were concerned, too, that the congregation was “becoming communist”—a matter of the paranoia of the times, Sister Micha observed, given strong Marcos propaganda against the “reds.” Some old-time nuns didn’t want the novices going out into the streets, either; they complained that the entrants were neglecting their prayers when late to vespers because participating in political rallies.

The more progressive sisters advocating change were articulate and persuasive, though. They argued that being out with the people constituted a sort of prayer, just like labor within the convent. Nor did this in any way make things easier for the postulants and novices. Sister Micha assured me that her life as an entrant had been even more structured than that of the women currently undergoing formation. Her novice mistress had made sure of the usual requirements and then had added more. For example, she had taken them on “exposures” during which they lived with the poor, without bathrooms or running water. Moreover, the novices had attended classes at the Sisters Formation Institute (SFI; now the Institute for Religious Studies, or IFRS), established by

the Association of Religious Superiors of the Philippines for all interested congregations and known for espousing radical, ground-up liberation theology. Here, they had learned to understand their spirituality as radical action and to recognize the heroic faith not only of the disciples but also of women and the poor, such as Deborah's female maid-servant, Jael, who saved Israel.

Such lessons had made a deep impression on Sister Micha, too. While some of the novices who had been raised more traditionally and were more invested in the image of Jesus as Santo Niño had found it difficult to accept the idea of Jesus having been in solidarity with the underprivileged and hadn't wanted to hear about the prophets rallying against the king's men, she had found it easy to open up to such new ways of thinking about Catholicism. What's more, she had found the suggestion that God might be feminine positively inspiring. The SFI teachings made her feel as if her "brain was brand-new and had never been used before"—rendering her vocation all the more compelling.

BEING BENEDICTINE

Learning to be Missionary Benedictine also entails the study and reinterpretation of a long monastic tradition with a special emphasis on Benedictinism. Indeed, the importance placed by the sisters on such church history was made particularly clear during a get-together the formators, postulants, and novices hosted in honor of St. Benedict's Feast Day, July 11. Following both a special Mass and a lavish buffet dinner, those of us invited to the celebration were treated to a show. "Hello everyone, can you hear me?" Sister Ambrose exclaimed, tapping on a microphone set up to one corner. Then she announced the night's entertainment. First, the postulants' would take a turn—this being their chance to prove knowledge of one of the central figures in the church canon: St. Benedict himself. In fact, the saint is of general historical importance to Catholicism, having composed one of the most influential set of rules for monastic life. What's more, all Benedictines, whether Missionary or otherwise and whether female or male, in some sense model themselves after their namesake. Becoming Benedictine implies following the saint's example, however loosely. Thus, all entrants are required to study *The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict (Bennet) of Nursia*, consisting in a partial and rather fantastical biography of the

saint's struggles with temptation and the devil as well as his service to those in need.

Having recently finished reading the aforementioned text, the postulants had decided to imaginatively reenact some of Bennet's better-known miracles. They dramatized Benedict banishing the devil from the grounds of a new abbey under construction, chastising his monks for attempting to hide their trespasses from him, reproaching King Totilas for trying to fool him by dressing one of his guards in a monarch's garb, and, finally, calling on God to miraculously revive a field-worker's dead son. Each episode not only testified to the saint's significant power but also conveyed important moral messages: devotion is stronger than sin, honesty and obedience are critical, faith and humility can accomplish great things. How could we help but conclude that Benedict had God on his side, as, to a good deal of sisterly and prospective applause alike, the players completed their stagecraft with bows, curtsies, and formal introductions in order of canonical age?

But there is also a more serious and perhaps more strictly historical side to the saint's biography, as conventionally distinguished from the biography of his miracles. Following a short intermission for compline, then, we were treated to another series of performances, this time executed by the novices, who had been charged with the task of portraying that life. They began with Bennet's departure from home, a tale relevant in many ways to their own choice to prioritize religious obligations over familial obedience. Then they enacted the story of Benedict's stint as a hermit in Subiaco, Italy, and the story of his miraculous escape from poisoning by corrupt brothers during his tenure as an abbot. Again, their dramatizations were as much moral as descriptive in character: the hero of the day prevailed because he was dedicated and humble, his integrity affording him salvation from the sins of others.

That wasn't all, though. The novices also performed the tale of St. Scholastica, Benedict's twin sister, with whom the saint purportedly reconvened on an annual basis. During one of their yearly reunions, Scholastica made the rather unusual request of her brother to stay by her side until morning. He adamantly refused to linger past nightfall, however, citing his duties as abbot. But his sister began praying to God. And, suddenly, the clear sky turned stormy, preventing Benedict's departure:

The man of God, seeing that he could not by reason of such thunder and lightning and great abundance of rain return back to his Abbey, began to be heavy and to complain of his sister, saying:

“God forgive you, what have you done?” to whom she answered: “I desired you to stay, and you would not hear me, I have desired our good Lord, and he hath vouchsafed to grant my petition.” . . . And so by that means they watched all night, and with spiritual and heavenly talk did mutually comfort one another: and therefore by this we see . . . that he would have had that thing, which yet he could not: for if we respect the venerable man’s mind, no question but he would have had the same fair weather to have continued as it was, when he set forth, but he found that a miracle did prevent his desire, which, by the power of almighty God, a woman’s prayers had wrought. And it is not a thing to be marveled at, that a woman which of long time had not seen her brother, might do more at that time than he could, seeing, according to the saying of St. John, “God is charity” [1 John 4:8] and therefore of right she did more which loved more. (St. Pachomius Library 1995, chap. 33)

Here, then, we have a miracle performed not by Benedict himself, but instead by his twin—in opposition to his stated wishes. And St. Scholastica’s success is due not only to the strength of her faith, itself indexed by God’s attention to the intensity of her prayer, but also the strength of her love. Loving more, in this case, renders it possible for her to do more “of right.”

Nor is the story insignificant within the Missionary Benedictine context. The tale suggests that women and men are equal in God’s eyes and that female devotion can override the prayers of even famous abbots under the right circumstances. Scholastica is no less a saint than her brother, and the favor God extends her is an important message of women’s rights within a church that has historically relegated women to subordinate status.⁹ Indeed, Scholastica and Benedict appear representative of a single impulse toward God in the final scene of the biography. According to the text, God sent Benedict a vision of his sister’s soul ascending to heaven in the form of a dove three days after their extended reunion. Thereupon, the abbot sent his monks “to bring her corpse to his Abbey, to have it buried in that grave which he had provided for himself: by means whereof it fell out that, as their souls were always one in God while they lived, so their bodies continued together after their death” (St. Pachomius Library 1995, chap. 34). Such funerary arrangements underscore the equal strength of the twins’ faith, notwithstanding their different social positions.

Of course, Scholastica’s love also transcends the disciplinary nature

of the Benedictine schedule. Her miracle making suggests that true spirituality is neither solely nor necessarily a matter of monastic rules but rather might even take precedence over such rules. The saint's success in maneuvering the extension of her brother's visit attests to both the importance of flexibility in the religious life and the importance of love itself (or at least platonic sibling love of the sort indexed in the monastic use of terms like *sister* and *brother*) as something arguably more definitive of Christianity than the letter of the law.

If St. Benedict is probably best known for his Rule, then, St. Scholastica, who remains a relatively mysterious figure outside of her brother's biography, is probably best known for her rule breaking. Nor does it seem inappropriate to find the female of the pair playing the subversive role. As noted earlier, women and men are not granted equal authority within the official Catholic hierarchy (women can't be priests or bishops or Popes), and women are not always granted full respect as spiritual leaders.¹⁰ But the very marginalization of women by the more conservative Church orthodoxy arguably affords women religious a privileged perspective. Marginalized figures are often in a better position to ascertain what is going on—distance often provides at least a certain degree of objectivity, not to mention freedom of action. And insofar as the Benedictine order only began admitting women monastics late in the day, St. Scholastica was not fully part of her brother's world. As a mere consecrated virgin, then, Scholastica may have been all the more willing to disregard the Benedictine schedule in order to act on her love.

Moreover, as a female rule breaker motivated by strong love as well as strong faith, she seems a fitting model—even a feminist one—for the Missionary Benedictines. No wonder the congregation's largest school is titled St. Scholastica's College: the saint's statue seems quite at home in the halls of one of the first area educational institutes to include women's studies courses in its curriculum.

ELIDING GENDER, PLAYING THE GENERIC

While gender matters to St. Scholastica's story precisely because the text of Benedict's biography includes so few women, however, Benedict himself is a much less noticeably gendered figure. Why? Because within both Church tradition and Philippine society, men are effectively the default. The histories of both Catholicism and the republic are populated primarily by male figures, and Filipino English speakers still

widely use *he* and *man* to indicate generic personhood. This in itself is problematic precisely insofar as it sends or affirms the message that men, not women, do things and make a difference in society. Indeed, this is why the Missionary Benedictines emphasize the use of inclusive language. Yet the fact that the male is the default within the Philippines has additional ramifications of a rather different sort. While the assumption that the generic person is male subtly but certainly forwards the notion that men matter more than women, it can also be turned on its head after a fashion by women who manage to break through such gender barriers.

Perhaps I can explain better with recourse to my own childhood. As a young girl with aspirations toward adventure and travel—and, I admit, with a certain pride in what was sometimes only a pretense of fearlessness in the face of fast downhill skateboarding, or tree climbing, or highboard diving—I was simultaneously quite aware of and even defensive of my gender, and quite hell-bent on proving, to myself as much as anyone else, that being a girl wouldn't stop me from doing what I wished. Not that I wanted to be a boy—I simply didn't want to be limited by my sex. And my favorite female heroines included such capable and courageous characters as Athena and Dorothy and Ozma of the Oz books.

But I didn't have much problem playing parts inspired by Tarzan, Merlin, and Buck Rogers either. I simply cast myself as a female protectress of the jungle or magician or science fiction adventurer. It didn't matter, in the end, that the originals were men: I could still act them happily enough. The male was enough of a default and my own aspirations were broad enough to allow for such elisions and gender crossings. Nor, in fact, do I think my experience was unusual, at least not with respect to those of my friends equally interested in such imaginative adventuring.

On the other hand, I don't think I ever saw my brother or any of his friends playing at such gender crossing, pretending to be male Athenas or Dorothys. While my female companions and I not only could and did appreciate and appropriate those female examples of heroism available to us but also quickly learned to appropriate the much more plentiful male models we came across—celebrating gender in the first case and ignoring it in the second—the boys populating my childhood world were more careful about keeping to Spiderman and Superman and Batman. And why not, when their masculine idols were already numerous enough to provide a wide range of possibility at play?

Not, of course, that this is all there is to what is in fact a complicated

process of learning and practicing gender; nor can my own experiences as a middle-class white girl in Ohio (albeit one who always felt an outsider) be mapped with any degree of certainty onto those of my informants. Nevertheless, the Missionary Benedictines have seemingly also learned to appropriate the male default for themselves. In fact, such appropriative tactics make sense for girls harboring activist ambitions in social contexts wherein male models of heroism are far more common than are female models of heroism. Ultimately, the nuns' use of both male and female models of virtue foreshadows their more radical attempts to cross over into traditionally male domains within Philippine society and to both claim and develop new capacities as women.

While St. Scholastica clearly holds particular relevance for the Missionary Benedictines as an example of specifically female spirituality, then, my informants expressed little difficulty simultaneously identifying with St. Benedict. Indeed, the ease with which the postulants and novices on stage took on the personas of the abbot and his monks, disguised in fake mustaches and loose robes, underlines the relative insignificance of gender for the nuns with respect to the examples afforded by at least the male members of the Benedictine canon. And the creative possibilities afforded by the selective and intentional interpretation of maleness as generic is all the more evident in the sisters' stated allegiance to Jesus Christ. Admittedly, in many ways, Jesus is obviously male (just as God is traditionally spoken of in the masculine): he is not only referred to as the "Son of God," the "Lord," and sometimes simply "He" but also is typically portrayed as very much the man he was in strictly historical terms. Yet this doesn't stop the nuns from professing the desire to be Christlike. They read Jesus, in other words, not so much as a man but more as a gender-neutral spiritual model, and they can do so precisely because masculinity is already often cast as the default.¹¹ If the term *mankind* encompasses womankind, why should Jesus's manhood prevent him from serving as a model of religious womanhood?

Of course, it may well be all the easier for the Missionary Benedictine Sisters to identify with St. Benedict and Christ alike precisely because the masculinity of both men is downplayed within most of the key texts documenting their lives and deeds. Neither appears very markedly male by traditional Filipino standards: neither is sexually promiscuous, neither wields significant political or economic power, neither uses violence or engages in macho posturing. Rather, Jesus in particular is portrayed as a man of patience and tolerance and, often, a

gentleness of spirit stereotypically associated with femininity in the Philippines.

My interviewees assured me, too, that, by their reading of the Bible, Christ was an equal-opportunity spiritual leader. His official disciples may have been male due to historical circumstance, but he also recognized Mary Magdalen's devotion even when she was ostracized by the general populace. He acknowledged the faith displayed by the sisters Mary and Martha, too, and the Virgin Mother certainly played an important part in his life.

NAMES, VEILS, AND RINGS

What of the remainder of the Missionary Benedictines' eight-year training, however? While the first two years of formation are completed at Marikina, the first half of the third year is typically completed elsewhere.¹² Second-year novices are placed in one of several different houses scattered over the Philippines, most consisting of four to ten Missionary Benedictine Sisters.¹³ Here, they help manage the congregation's educational, medical, or social-action apostolates, thereby gaining a better sense of what it means to be a nun outside. Six months of debriefing and processing follow, culminating in the rite of first profession, which marks graduation from the Marikina house and the transition to the juniorate.

At this time, entrants make their first vows to poverty, chastity, and obedience, all taken very seriously, if only lay vows. They also publicly mark their official certificates of first profession, "like prewedding contracts," often signing the commitment cards beforehand in an attempt to avoid nervous mistakes and unsteady hands (or such is the usual practice; ever the rebel, Sister Micha confessed to having signed her card during the ritual itself—her signature she sighed, looked like "chicken scratching.") Then there is the all-important "Giving of the Religious Names," prefaced by an explanatory statement from the prioress: "As a sign of the new way of life that you will live, and likewise as a sign that you are now part of our community, we give you your new names as religious." Notably, every novice is allowed to suggest three appellatory possibilities, ideally taken from the canon of saints recognized by the Benedictines, if also often dictated by the desire for paternal appeasement. Their first choices are usually honored, too, although Sister Micha told me one of her fellow entrants, desirous of greater certainty, had requested *Jean*, *Jeanie*, and *Omelet*, banking on the

fact that the convent superiors wouldn't want a Sister Omelet in their number.

Finally, the new junior sisters receive their veils (meaning the entire habit) in what is termed the "blessing and presentation of the sign of consecration." Although markedly less comfortable than the breezier novitiate garb, these visibly signify a major step on the road to full sisterhood. The entrants now look like nuns and now bear the responsibility of their formal religious pledges to at least temporarily subscribe to convent rules and routines that previously were only voluntary.

While the juniorate technically lasts five years, however, the sisters' first vows are only good for three years; after that, each sister is given the opportunity to renew them for another year and then one more yet before taking permanent vows.¹⁴ First-year junior sisters live in the juniorate house, attached to the main priory building but with a separate library, classroom, and prayer room. During this stage of their formation, entrants study the congregational charism with greater intensity, participate in household duties around the priory, and undertake further formative studies at the IFRS.

Second- and third-year juniors, on the other hand, are again assigned to various provincial Missionary Benedictine communities where for the first time they get a chance to work in the different congregational apostolates as proper sisters wearing the habit and bearing real responsibilities. Fourth-years return to the juniorate house and continue formative studies to gain a better perspective on their experiences in community, while fifth-years commence preparation for their primary, perpetual vows under the tutelage of their juniorate directress (in this case Sister Mary Peter). During this time, focus is placed on intensive reading and thinking about the Benedictine Missionary charism, monasticism, the Rule, the constitution, and the vows. Fifth-year juniors also spend half the day working around the house, cooking and cleaning in the kitchen, doing repairs, and the like.

The reward, of course, is advancement to full sisterhood. Admittedly, usually less than half of every year's entrants make their perpetual vows. In fact, the eleven novices who made their first profession during my field tenure were applauded as part of an especially large group—usually, only seven or eight make it through the novitiate alone in any given year. What's more, the rites of final profession I attended testified to a high dropout rate in the juniorate. The first celebration of perpetual vows I observed, in April, was a solo affair, and only two juniors made their final profession during the second ceremony I witnessed, in September.¹⁵

Nor is the ritual insignificant. Like the sisters' rites of first profes-

sion, the nuns' rites of final profession take place in conjunction with and as part of a special Mass in St. Scholastica's chapel, the primary difference being that the juniors receive rings signifying their fidelity to God and their full congregation membership. Furthermore, their vows are now for life. And more than one of my informants claimed the day of her final profession was the most important day of her life.

The sisters also explicitly liken the ceremony to a wedding. There is the ring, of course. Moreover, the nuns are quick to point out parallels between the vows they make and traditional Catholic marital vows. During their final profession, juniors promise fidelity (through chastity) to Christ as a figurative husband while pledging to consummate the union through obedience, poverty, and service. Juniors are often teased about "marrying" God, too. While preparing for Sister Jacqueline's rite of perpetual profession, for example, the sisters played with the nervous initiate: Was she ready to be married? Was she ready for the ring? Did she want to back out? Too late—her parents had already arrived! Her parents weren't the only ones, either—the chapel was crowded with nuns from all over the Philippines, for whom most of the right side pews in the building had been reserved.

While the vocation appears at odds with popular ideals of family and marriage, then, the Missionary Benedictines have managed to appropriate much of the symbolism associated with such ideals for their own purposes. And this doubtless not only helps ameliorate lingering insecurities about the unorthodox nature of the vocation but also renders the sisters' rites of final profession—marking the end of a full eight years of formation—all the more emotionally compelling.

Unggoy Formation

Of course, the rite of final profession, while highly significant, isn't really as final as the name implies. After making their perpetual vows, the Missionary Benedictines commence "ongoing formation"—or, Sister Micha hinted with an impish grin, "*unggoy* formation." *Unggoy* formation? *Unggoy* means "monkey": was the sister mocking the convent hierarchy with the suggestion that the nuns were being trained to something of a circus act? Or was she instead playing monkey herself—with the intimation that being Missionary Benedictine often as not entails making mischief of a decidedly serious sort? After all, their veils notwithstanding, the sisters are not really creatures of habit; rather, their ongoing formation involves a high degree of self-consciousness, developed through and applied to particular apostolates. If seemingly aping routine forms, the Missionary Benedictines are also—and more importantly—messing around with cultural expectations. Nor did any of my informants take more delight than Sister Micha in monkeying around, so to speak, with popular assumptions and social norms, always with a smile on her face but also with a persistent commitment to provocation. Not that she condoned rebellion for the mere sake of rebellion: she wasn't forgiving of ignorance or irresponsibility and could be strictly disciplinary of both herself and others where, in her mind, appropriate or necessary. Nevertheless, if a nun could be naughty, naughty she was—with shock tactics and sarcasm to forward what were actually very serious attempts to expand the realm of social possibility.

CONSECRATED CHASTITY

Notwithstanding her sisterly vow to "embrace a life of consecrated chastity for the sake of the kingdom, to forego marriage and family and

to oblige [herself] to perfect continence,” sex was one of Sister Micha’s favorite topics of controversy and conversation.¹ Nor should this be surprising. After all, while nuns are celibate, this hardly implies asexuality, a point made earlier in discussing Sister Micha’s college boyfriends.

The sister confessed to having fallen in love with one of her retreat masters, too. In fact, their romance had rendered her pledge to chastity both all the more difficult and, ultimately, more meaningful. The affair, such as it was, had reassured the sister of her capacity to enter into a workable partnership with a man, the measure of ideal femininity by traditional Philippine standards. It had been hard, though—even devastating—when the retreat ended and their communications ceased. She had become very angry with the Lord; indeed, she hadn’t been able to do the Adoration for an entire month. Instead, she had struggled with God. What was the point of having at last brought her love only to demand its sacrifice?

Then the answer had come. In a moment of insight, Sister Micha suddenly realized that she would not in fact have said “yes” had the priest asked her to marry him. In the end, then, the experience had strengthened her dedication to the vocation. She now understood, she explained, that celibacy was not so much a matter of the repression or rejection of love and sexuality but rather an expression of the intensity of devotion—it was a positive, not negative, choice to contain desire made all the more significant in the wake of temptation. The nuns’ chastity is consecrated, after all. The sisters vow to embrace celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom”: in other words, it is the pledge to follow in Christ’s footsteps through service to others that entails sexual abstinence.

Celibacy can also be understood in more practical terms. Sister Josephine, for one, told me she felt that combining religious dedication and matrimony would be too difficult, not as a matter of principle, but on a pragmatic level:

You lessen the availability, number one. Number two, even the focus of service would be divided. . . . Because in marriage, I see it like the first concern that the husband has is the wife, and the wife’s is the husband. And next the children. Only third is the work. Because you cannot take care of the work and abandon your husband or your wife. And your children. You can’t be very efficient in your work. You cannot be available anytime, anywhere, if you are married.

In short, she simply didn't think it would be possible to be both a good nun and a good spouse, particularly given the many domestic responsibilities accorded wedded women in the Philippines. Really, then, energy as much as sex was at issue for her.

What's more, such was the case precisely because she would never have entertained the idea of sex outside the context of marriage. Most of my Missionary Benedictine informants would only admit to three options—as Sister Virginia put it, one could stay single and celibate, become a nun, or marry a man. Of course, in actuality, many Filipinas do become involved in premarital or extramarital sexual affairs because they are lesbians, *queridas*, or prostitutes, or simply for the sake of pleasure. According to Catholic doctrine, however, all such activity is not only illegitimate but also sinful. Within the church, it is an either or thing; either marry or forgo sexuality.

Indeed, even the usually countercultural Sister Micha confessed herself unduly influenced by what she termed the “cult of virginity” in the Philippines. She couldn't help feeling that she'd be a bad woman indeed were she to engage in intercourse out of wedlock. Although highly critical of the psychological and social damage done women due to negative Catholic attitudes toward female sexuality, she admitted to a good deal of bodily shame herself. In fact, she was having difficulty getting used to the idea that she would soon lose her hymen. Doctor's visits are required of all Missionary Benedictines, once 35, in order to probe for cancerous growths in the uterus. And the hymen is broken in the process! Such a small thing, really—in fact, one of the older sisters hadn't even realized her hymen was broken for a full three years after first going through the procedure. When she found out, however, she had been shocked, just as Sister Micha herself was shocked at the very idea. She'd rather avoid the whole thing, she told me. But the others said she'd have to go through it because she “didn't use it.” Nor was this just superstition. While the sister herself was vague on the relevant medical physiology, modern medicine has identified possible causal links between uterine cancer and high estrogen levels, and women who never go through pregnancy, and thus maintain consistently high estrogen levels throughout their lives, appear to be at higher risk.

Of course, predictably, Sister Micha's response was to suggest that the nuns therefore start “using it”—at least it would be fun. Seriously, though, she didn't like the idea of “preserving her virginity for a scalpel.” She had enjoyed being physically intimate with her boyfriends but had never “gone all the way” precisely because she wanted to die

with her hymen intact. Even if in a clinical setting, the idea of it being broken felt wrong. To be sure, this was only a “feeling thing;” on a rational level, Sister Micha knew that the probe wasn’t the same as losing her virginity. She didn’t even think virginity should be such a big deal for women, either. It was just that the very thought of the procedure made her incredibly anxious—she couldn’t help it.

On the other hand, whatever her emotional response to the thought of surrendering her hymen to anything or anyone whatsoever, the sister appeared perfectly comfortable contemplating the dynamics of female sexual pleasure. In fact, she exhibited definite curiosity about the topic. She told me that during the first women’s studies cognate class at St. Scholastica’s, she had learned that the vaginal orgasm was a myth; prior to that, she hadn’t known the clitoris was so important.² But many Philippine men wouldn’t even acknowledge the possibility of clitoral orgasms for fear of their female partners leaving upon the realization that heterosexual intercourse was neither necessary to nor any guarantee of their own sexual satisfaction.³ Indeed, had she only known what the “third sex”—a Philippine euphemism for homosexuality—meant when filling out her application to the convent, she might have put down that she “loved it.” Not really, she added, but it was important to be able to talk about these things. Like in the movie *The Color Purple*, Sister Micha added, where the characters identified the clitoris as the “button.” The sisters had all loved this, she said—after seeing it, one of them had asked, “Don’t we have a practicum for this?” If only they did, Sister Micha grinned. The teacher had likened orgasms to sneezes, too, with an accumulation of tension building up to a final release. Was this true, she wondered? And the instructor had gone on to suggest that sneezes were “nasal orgasms,” which all the sisters thought wonderful. If they had to miss out on the actual thing, here was an approximation of it, if one of more importance in the phrasing than the experience.

Such interest and even delight in discussing female sexuality indexes a significant shift in perspective on the part of the Missionary Benedictines, too. While knowledge of the clitoris, female orgasms, and the possibility of sexual pleasure beyond that gained through vaginal penetration is certainly embedded in the female body itself and is thus theoretically fully accessible to all women, people learn to understand and use their bodies very differently in different cultural contexts. Given the Philippine and Catholic presumption of male initiative and mere female accommodation and the configuration of the female body as something “dirty,” corrupting, and in need of protection and conceal-

ment, the recognition of the possibility of disassociating the female orgasm from penetration is radical, both as new and culturally taboo knowledge and as knowledge harboring subversive potential.

After all, the idea of clitoral pleasure not only challenges male investment in vaginal penetration as the measure and aim of sexual intercourse but also suggests that the state of the hymen might be less than adequate as a measure of female sexual experience. As intimated earlier, Filipinos by and large value the preservation of the hymen specifically as a physical sign of purity—hence Sister Micha’s anxiety about the breakage of the hymen, particularly with little knowledge of the potential pain or pleasure involved in such breakage. But the identification of the clitoris, instead of the hymen-covered vagina, as the primary female sexual organ shifts the meanings of such body parts themselves, suggesting that the importance placed on the hymen within Catholic and Philippine culture is misguided or at any rate very biased. If women can have orgasms with their hymens intact, it is quite simply inaccurate to measure female chastity with reference to the hymen. And, in Sister Micha’s case, this meant that the breakage of the hymen was not really something about which she should be overly concerned—because an invalid means of assessing sexual practice in the first place.

If the sister was in fact working through her own anxieties in discussing sex with me, however, it is worth observing that, in many ways, her status as a nun afforded her the freedom to do so. True, the pledge to celibacy limited Sister Micha’s own bodily experience of (and thus probably produced increased nervousness about) intercourse and orgasms. On the other hand, she could freely talk about sexuality in public with minimal fear of reprobation precisely because her veil provided a manifest guarantee of moral rectitude. Wearing the signs of her celibacy on her body in very visible fashion, she could safely speak of sex in potentially subversive ways without having to worry about being accused unchaste. While most “good” Philippine women of at least the middle and upper classes are expected to “act virginal,” the sister, as a nun, could explore taboo topics in a simultaneous attempt to reform her own relationship with her body and shock others into reexamining their prejudices. In short, the habit provides both a form of sexual license and the public authority to make and even challenge (or, as the Vatican might put it, subvert and pervert) moral judgments about sexual propriety in ways arguably empowering to women (a point to be taken up presently in greater depth).

Of course, the vow to celibacy is also cited as justification for the seg-

regation of women and men within different monastic communities. For the Church, the mixing of the sexes represents an inevitable threat to chastity and therefore must be avoided through the institution of single-sex congregations. As Sister Josephine explained,

Men could not live in the convent with the women. It's all separate. It cannot be that they will live together, it cannot be. . . . Eventually some people will get to be more friendly with each other, a man and a woman—you cannot let that happen. [We] cannot live together because our vow is celibacy. . . . One of the priests who gave the lessons to the junior sisters said, actually, the relationship between a man and a woman is sexual. . . . This is very normal. This is how God made it. When the relationship is deepened, it looks to be sexual, and you cannot have that.

Yet the expectation that relationships between men and women inevitably and always end up being sexual (and that same-sex relationships are never sexual) is highly debatable. Indeed, Sister Josephine herself spoke of having been good friends with men in whom she was not romantically interested. Likewise, while Sister Micha admitted to having fallen in love with her retreat master—despite the segregation of their communities—she also talked of having had emotionally significant but entirely platonic relationships with many of the male members of her college *barkada*. Nor should the fact that the congregation ideally wants applicants with some prior romantic experience be forgotten. In other words, we are discussing a population of very consciously chaste women already proven capable of maintaining celibacy (notwithstanding continued interactions across sex in the form of retreats, conferences, and even daily Masses) precisely because God is more compelling to them than heterosexual intimacy or true love.

Why, then, such concern about keeping men out of the convent? The problem here, in part, appears to be the assumption that the vow to celibacy is barely restraining some sort of wild sexuality all the more apt to fly out of control, given the chance, due to repressive convent constraints. While my informants took pains to cast their chastity in terms of a positive choice to give their energy to God instead of any mortal person (and while much of the Missionary Benedictines' work brings them into significant contact with men), a certain lack of faith in the strength of the pledge, not to mention a definite heterosexual bias, are evidenced in the community's same-sex rule.

On the other hand, if the Missionary Benedictine Sisters are living in

a consciously separatist space, this space is itself potentially subversive of the ways in which the Church imagines the proper roles of women and men. While Catholic orthodoxy has traditionally supported the hierarchalization of gender roles (with women configured in the passive, domestic, and maternal terms of the traditional Marian virtues), such assumptions about innate capacity don't go very far within the religious sisterhood. In the convent—or at least the Missionary Benedictine convent in the Philippines—gender is no longer relevant to the determination of who does what, who has authority, who talks more, who makes critical decisions, and so on. Rather, individual personality, skill, and training take on more importance, and culturally feminine and culturally masculine roles are assigned to convent members solely according to assessments of capability.

The Missionary Benedictines' success as an all-female cooperative also challenges Philippine cultural assumptions concerning female dependence on males. The sisterhood makes for a very tangible argument that women can in fact do the sorts of things traditionally assigned men within the Filipino family—making decisions and exerting authority, using their logical capacities instead of breaking down in the face of crises, earning money for their households, doing manual labor. In other words, the nuns manage quite well without men within a “familial” context (just as men can manage quite well without women in male religious communities). And such self-sufficiency has undoubtedly contributed to the sisters' growing awareness of the mutability of gender roles and stereotypes. It actually makes a good deal of sense then that, as independent, resourceful, intelligent, hardworking, and rational women in the company of other women with these qualities, the Missionary Benedictines have begun taking issue with the ways in which womanhood is popularly configured in the Philippines.

SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

What, on the other hand, of the sisters' vow to poverty? As Sister Josephine explained, it isn't that the nuns are actually impoverished—it is more that they both relinquish their personal possessions to the larger community and make conscious efforts to limit their material requirements:

[The] vow of poverty is that we don't have money, and when we take our perpetual vow, we give to the congregation or we give

back to our families our inheritance. That's a legal paper we sign. Now for anything that you would need—material—you have to ask for it, and you would get it. . . . If you need things to wear, shoes, you just have to ask, and it would be given. But it is left to you to be responsible, that when you ask you really need it. . . . It's allowed for us that we have books we need, the things we need for teaching, etc. These are things that you need. But later on if you want to keep the things you needed, you can bring it along with you, it would be allowed—but if you also like, you can also give it to the convent. . . . You don't own a car, you don't own the big things. Like one of the nuns, she came in, she owned a car—she gave it to the congregation. And so the community will use it, [it's] not only for her use. And these are the big things. . . . Then, you have a limited number of things: for example, you have seven habits, and you cannot have differences, like you have outside, different colors of blouses and shoes. There is no variety, like white or gray—black veil or white veil, and so on. . . . Basically, you don't need a lot of things.

This isn't all, however. In fact, the nuns appear to be practicing something tantamount to sympathetic magic—they appear to understand themselves as taking on the burden of poverty through their own privation. What's more, they have appropriated indigence as a religious imperative. In identifying as “poor,” if by choice and from a position of privilege, the sisters have effectively reconfigured destitution as a sign of grace. While the Missionary Benedictines are committed to the struggle against economic inequity in the Philippines, they are also invested in manipulating the meanings of poverty, revaluing what is often in fact experienced as grave hardship as an indication, instead, of heavenly favor and future rewards. In part, such tactics are doubtless intended to persuade the laity (and especially the rich) that spiritual wealth—wealth of character, virtue, and faith—is ultimately more important than material fortune. But monastic poverty is not just a loaded message to the masses: it also represents a means of displaying spiritual prowess to self and others.

This can be dangerous, too. New entrants in particular are apt to get caught up in the assumption that the fewer one's needs, the greater one's grace, with privation the focus of significant, if subtle, competition, not to mention personal pride. Take Mona, for instance. The first time we met, she asked if I'd mind a quick stop by the nuns' kitchen, located between the priory and the Manila community house. She was

hoping to find an apron she had lost about a month earlier when helping with the preparations and cleanup for Sister Mary Peter's feast day celebration. She only had one apron now, and she had been placed on kitchen duty at Marikina the past week, so it was getting dirty. Normally, it wouldn't matter, as the formation house community keeps spare aprons around, but she was tall by Philippine standards, and the extras didn't cover her legs well enough. Of course, she could also get a replacement apron made, but this would entail telling the sisters, and, even after two years of having had to ask her superiors for every little thing, she was nervous about confessing to her forgetfulness. Not that they would punish her—it was just that they would know that she had been careless, something of which she was ashamed, and something about which she was concerned (given her probationary status) precisely because she was supposed to keep her needs to a minimum.

Likewise, Li, a new Chinese postulant, had difficulties with the mandate to poverty. A few months after entering, she contacted Joy, a cousin of hers living at the priory, to request both a headband to keep her hair out of her eyes and a pair of scissors to replace a pair she had accidentally broken. When her cousin obliged, however, both of them were lectured by the professed sisters. Never mind the very real possibility that Li had either misunderstood the formation house rules or been too scared to approach the rather sarcastic Sister Ambrose in person, this was a serious act of disobedience. Entrants are supposed to learn poverty, and poverty is about more than simply doing without personal possessions. The vow not only entails the recognition that nothing is one's own and that everything must be obtained through one's superiors; it is also intended as a lesson in openly taking responsibility for both mistakes and real needs. The vow to poverty is really, Sister Josephine later told me, about humility: humility, more than material lack, makes for problems for many postulants—who have to get used to requesting even toothpaste, paper, and stamps from their formators.

At issue here, then, is not so much excessive want as guilt about wanting anything at all and shame at having to confess to need. The difficulty is both a matter of taking the rule too seriously as an injunction to do without and worrying about the wrath (or disappointment) of the formation mistresses. If the entrants' desire to prove themselves good nuns disciplines their material appetites, it also ironically engenders minor subversions of the sort mentioned above—notably, more easily confessed to me than to the sisters in charge.

Of course, when the vow to poverty works—when, in other words,

entrants get beyond the feeling that being poor must be taken to an extreme to demonstrate spiritual virtue—it is, my informants told me, very liberating. One doesn't even have to negotiate one's salary; as Sister Josephine observed, "You don't see it. You give it to the superior because it supports everybody else, not only you—communal, common. . . . It's enough. I like it. No need to worry. Just the things that you need. . . . For me, it's very freeing—you have less. I think I have to work on that more, I want to have less and less." Indeed, the Missionary Benedictine lifestyle itself encourages minimalism: "stuff" is simply more trouble than it is worth:

We move from place to place—we don't stay in one place for a long time. . . . Imagine if you've got a lot of things—my God, how would you transfer? You travel by road, you travel by rail, with a lot of excess baggage. . . . That is so awful. You know, it takes a lot of time to pack and unpack. . . . That is not realistic. So [if] I don't need it, I bring it home—I send it over to the house, or I leave it myself, whatever it is, I bring it home. . . . Whenever I go to the home, I sort [my things] out, those that are unneeded. I return [the gifts I receive] or I sell them for the recycled paper, and so on, or my nieces or my sisters could use it. . . . There are clothes I don't need—I give them away.

On the other hand, it is easy to do without precisely because this isn't "real" poverty—the sisters do not have to worry, as truly poor Filipinos do, about whether or not they will have something to eat in the morning or somewhere to stay at night. While they own little individually, the Missionary Benedictines as a collective are far from destitute—they live in relatively comfortable, clean quarters; employ domestic helpers to do much of their laundry and cooking; are allotted their own space (however small and however temporary); have enough food; are guaranteed medical care in the event of health problems; and are provided with good care in their old age. In fact, I found the priory parlor in Manila more pleasant than my own home: I delighted in the gardens surrounding the buildings, I enjoyed the comfort of the air-conditioned conference room, I appreciated the possibility of hot-water showers in at least one of the guest bathrooms. All of these amenities stood in marked contrast not only to my own "middle-class" residence—cement walled, rife with cockroaches and rats and plumbing problems, and very hot almost all of the time—but also, much more drastically, to the actual indigence of the nearby slums, where families

are crowded into one-room shacks of rotting wood and cardboard with no running water whatsoever and hardly any protection from flooding or typhoons or the many and varied insects and rodents populating the city. In short, whatever the very real psychological ramifications of the vow to poverty and however seriously the nuns take their training to minimalism, the Missionary Benedictine life affords a certain degree of comfort justified as necessary for the sisters' work.

The fact that the nuns understand and present themselves as pledged to poverty remains important in other ways, though. Status in the Philippines is often demonstrated and created through conspicuous consumption—owning things and showing them off. Material goods also have a sort of social currency—giving and owing are important to social life, greasing the wheels in a cycle of debts of gratitude. But the poverty embraced by the congregation distances the sisters from mainstream Philippine socioeconomic networks wherein the display of possessions and the exchange of presents is central. In other words, the vow not only facilitates detachment from material greed and desire but also effects a certain separation from popular Filipino values and modes of interaction.

And this, in turn, may afford the nuns a new perspective. Pledged to poverty themselves, they may be in a better position than many to critique the materialism surrounding them—not to mention the sorts of cultural dynamics functioning to maintain a very large gap between the rich and the poor in the Philippines. Indeed, as intimated earlier, the vow is at least in part politicized. Inscribed on the sisters' very bodies through their experience of voluntary minimalism, it represents solidarity with the poor as well as personal poverty, and, beyond that, an injunction to fight for the rights of the underprivileged. Thus, during Sister Jacqueline's final profession, the Missionary Benedictines' "Preference for Christ and Option for the Poor" was explicitly explained as a call to activism: "Let us ask St. Benedict and St. Scholastica to intercede for our civic leaders in this Christian nation that central in their socio-economic-political programs would be Christ's concerns for the promotion and defense of human dignity and social justice."

THE MOST DIFFICULT THING

Obedience, in contrast, is more problematic for many of the sisters. Indeed, all of my informants claimed this the most troublesome of the vows. While they could fairly easily reconcile themselves to chastity and

minimalism as necessary to and necessitated by their vocation, being obedient sometimes meant acting against their own best judgment. Admittedly, they had a model here in Christ. During her final profession, for example, Sister Jacqueline pledged “obedience to her superiors . . . according to the Benedictine Rule and the congregation’s Constitution . . . just as ‘Jesus Christ, as Son, submitted himself entirely by becoming obedient even unto death.’”

However, Christ’s obedience was only to God rather than to fallible humans acting as spokespersons for the Lord. The vow of obedience, on the other hand, depends on, refers to, and supports a very definite hierarchy of authority within the convent (as is true of all Roman Catholic religious communities). Every Missionary Benedictine house, Sister Josephine observed, has a superior, an assistant, and a treasurer. Then, there is the prioress, who, assisted by the subprioress and three councilors, essentially functions as the prime Philippine official—to whom the superiors of each Philippine house are accountable. Moreover, all congregation prioresses and provinces (or countries in which Missionary Benedictine houses have been established) are themselves subject to the authority of the international Mother General, based in Rome. The General has an assistant too, not to mention five councilors; together, they form the highest governing body of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters.

Thus, my informants were bound to obey a whole host of sisters above them. And again, doing so could be difficult when it meant having to compromise personal integrity. Sister Josephine, for example, spoke of having had conflicts with an area priest during one of her assignments. In her opinion, he was not fulfilling his duties to his flock, and although she couldn’t replace him, she nevertheless felt it her own duty as a religious sister to pressure him to reform. So, she told me, she was vocal about letting the community know she thought he was neglecting his responsibilities, and she even directly chided him for his negligence. Predictably, however, the priest didn’t welcome her interference, and, after a while, complained to her superior, who thereupon directed Sister Josephine to keep her tongue to herself. But this, she said, was tough: she honestly believed the priest was failing the people and felt she couldn’t just let it go. It was as if God was prompting her to keep at the priest while simultaneously acting, through her superior, to prevent her from doing so.

Nor was the incident a one-time thing. Sister Josephine admitted to having found herself

[in] hot waters many times because of my being very open and very vocal. But [Sister Justine] told me twice, “Come on, don’t let that shut you up. We need people who are like that, and we need religious who are like that.” There was a time when I was discerning: Should I stay, or should I just go out and be more effective if I am out because there is no superior, no structure that’s going to limit?

For her, obedience was problematic for moral and spiritual reasons, then, rather than due to simple obstinacy; it was her conscience that made it hard.

Yet, in the end, she managed to come to terms with this most difficult of vows during a monthlong retreat she requested precisely in order to determine whether or not she wanted to spend her life subject to others’ authority. At the retreat house, she told me,

there was a tree in the garden, [and] every day I looked at it. It was a tree that had been hit by the typhoons. It fell. It was halfway . . . but it was alive. It was still halfway—it was strong, but it couldn’t go up anymore. But it was alive. And it had fruits! I told my confessor, my friend, the priest, I’ve been looking at this tree for one month, and this week I told myself I feel like I’m that tree. . . . Even [after all] this time I consider myself like that tree. . . . I have not yet gotten back to full standing-up position. I said, I can see it is very productive, it is still good, it’s still alive. So I told him, I feel like I am like that. I’m not yet dead, you know. I can still pull myself back up. But I can only do that if I hang on to Christ once more.

In other words, notwithstanding the forces bearing down on her and preventing her from standing as tall, or being as straightforward, as she might wish, she realized that she still could be effective within the religious life. The key was to adopt a shift in perspective, to recognize her very struggles with obedience as a call back to Christ and as a lesson in humility that would ultimately make her all the stronger. If her superiors’ orders sometimes appeared the mistaken and hasty decisions of sisters who just happened to be higher than her in the hierarchy, it was also quite possible that God really did want her to keep quiet on occasion in order to allow people to work things out for themselves. In such cases, perhaps her role was to agitate from a distance but not directly to interfere lest she obstruct the spiritual growth of her comrades. More-

over, perhaps toning her opinions down would gain her a wider audience: “In the end I saw . . . I cannot give full force to what I want to do. . . . I could be more effective and I could reach more people if I temper it. I’d maybe turn off some if I come out very strong. And the other thing I think, with God’s blessings I decided—I think it was His grace. I realized I had already done enough and more, and I could still do something in.”

MISSIONARY MOBILITY

Of course, agreeing to obey doesn’t mean agreeing not to complain about it. Indeed, not only Sister Josephine but also Sister Virginia and Sister Micha openly expressed dissatisfaction with some of their work assignments. One of the most consistently controversial aspects of the convent structure appears to be the sisters’ placement in the community’s various Philippine houses. While it is possible to indicate one’s preferences or even to object, with good reason, to particular assignments, individual nuns really have little control over the tasks to which they are put.⁴ Instead, their superiors decide how to distribute them on a shifting cycle of work rotations.

Not that I realized this at first. I initially assumed that my informants would be able to define their often rather specialized and skilled work for me in some definite manner, just the way the lay Filipinos I met identified themselves as teachers, jeepney *draybers* (drivers), or politicians. But it soon became clear that the claim to be junior directress, principal, or dean of student affairs meant something rather different and much less long term within the congregation. In fact, the Missionary Benedictine constitution requires constant career changes. Although the sisters’ assignments are supposed to last at least three years, the sisters are in fact moved around with greater frequency according to both the perceived unsuitability of specific individuals to specific posts and the perceived need for particular skills in those posts. Holding any single assignment for more than five years is prohibited, too. Thus, the nuns’ *vitas* proved both full and diverse, belying any attempts they might make to associate themselves with any single profession.

Indeed, the Missionary Benedictines’ claim to always be with the Lord “wherever we are and whatever we do” could hardly be more specific. Their whereabouts and responsibilities are many and various:

this, in fact, is what it means for them to be missionary. And, in turn, this meant getting hold of informants wasn't always easy, a lesson I learned on my very first day of official fieldwork. At the time, of course, I was anxious about finding willing interviewees as, nervously sweating in the blouse I had so carefully selected for my initial excursion beyond the stern block of yellow wall, I bravely made my way through the convent gates. A difficult thing—accomplished to mumbles of “scuze, scuze” on the part of Filipino and foreigner alike as I nudged past bustling blue and white uniformed students, studiously ignoring the stares that greeted my obvious difference. Then there were the insistent questions of the security officer at the visitors' entrance: “What is your name? Why are you here? Who do you wish to see? Are they expecting you?” What luck—the grace of God, the nuns would say—that Sister Justine had provided me with a list of names before departing the country on sabbatical. Good, too, that I came armed with the requisite picture ID, to be exchanged for a color coded pass affording me temporary access to the Priory. Yet, even so, my hopes of a collective introduction were not to be realized. “Sister Constance,” the guard informed me, “is in Rome for the Congress until December, and Sister Claudia is in Bacolod, and” she added after calling the main house, “Sister Placid just left with a group of students for an ‘exposure’ to the poor. But I think Sister Micha and Sister Josephine will see you, if you don't mind waiting, and you can check about the others at the desk.”⁵

Obviously, I didn't mind waiting and found myself rewarded for it with the kindness of an accommodating congregation. But the experience made it quite clear that I wasn't dealing with a stable subject population. The sisters' work often takes them away from the convent itself. In fact, mobility of both vocation and place is required of the nuns, whose assignments often entail travel across the country. Thus, the prioress, Sister Vera, was often absent from the priory house visiting other congregational communities, and, as vocation directress, Sister Virginia was kept constantly on the go—by boat, plane, train, bus, and foot. In addition, many of the nuns go abroad at some point in their careers, for study, conferencing, or—like Sister Caroline, who was given a special farewell mass when appointed to Africa—more traditional missionary work. And, again even those sisters temporarily placed in more stable positions of local responsibility are transferred to different posts every few years by constitutional decree.

This bears on the geography of the ethnography, too. Geography is usually considered contextually important to ethnography—thus the

inclusion of maps delineating locations or lines of travel in many anthropological monographs. Nor is situating ethnographic work in this fashion usually a difficult thing; typically, it simply entails determining the lay of the land in relation to prominent natural or sociopolitical markers. Yet I cannot simply follow anthropological convention in pinpointing my subjects, or indeed the compass of my fieldwork, to a single spot. My informants were all fairly well traveled across the ambiguous lines separating Metro Manila from the geographical and cultural margins of the Philippines.⁶ The nuns are trained to such mobility early on, too; entrants from the city are typically placed in provincial positions during the novitiate and juniorate, and vice versa, in order to give all a taste of the full range of possibilities. Being Missionary Benedictine, then, means residing and working neither in the national capitol region nor outside it but rather always across the divide—in other words, not only in Manila and Marikina but also in Baguio, Pampanga (Angeles and San Fernando), Nueva Ecija (Palayan City), Legaspi, Bacolod, Lapu-Lapu, Tabunok, Ormoc, Tacloban, Malaybalay, Bukidnon, and Marikhatag, Surigao del Sur. In short, the nuns, as nuns, live in the Philippines in the broadest sense.

And, this list hardly does justice to the sisters' plans to pursue ever new apostolates and transfer the old to lay compatriots. The congregation is also international, with houses in Tutzing, Germany (where the motherhouse is located); the United States (Nebraska); Brazil; Portugal; Korea; Angola; and Kenya. In addition, mention might be made of many and various extracongregational locales, such as the U.S. academy that hosted Sister Justine during much of 1995. Missionary service overseas is actively encouraged in all branches of the sisterhood, too, and, while I was in Manila, the sisters were actively working to further expand their membership, with a specific focus on China and India.⁷

Geographical specificity here would entail tracing multiple lines of past, present, and even possible future movement on a world map, then, a futile exercise in connecting the dots across the globe over time. In fact, the "real" geography of my ethnography instead defaulted to my own location in space and time during fieldwork, coincident with the often unpredictable location of others in the same space and time. And thus my interviewees passed through my life and my notes in constantly changing rotation. In situating my study at St. Scholastica's College and the Missionary Benedictine priory in Manila, I had to deal with an ever-shifting pool of informants, forcing me to examine the importance of such positional instability to the sisters' identities.

After all, my very inability to provide some sort of concrete and unified geographical description of my ethnographic population as a whole underscores the fact that the congregation is not premised on presumed national or regional solidarity but rather conceives of itself as a body unified by belief—and a body originally founded specifically to do missionary work outside the confines of the cloister. Indeed, the missionary nature of the sisters' vocation effectively always orients them toward the margins of society. Their very charism renders them frontierswomen of sorts who, by virtue of their commitment to the forgotten and underprivileged, at least theoretically look to need rather than tradition as a determinant of location.

At the same time, while my informants represent rather extreme (and arguably even postmodern) examples of subject mobility, such mobility is in fact a reality of a good many people's lives, at least within the modern day. And this in and of itself warrants anthropological attention. Ethnography often depends on and supports a fiction of stability—a description of particular persons within particular spatial and temporal contexts as if representative of long-term cultural truths. To what extent is maintaining such fictions of stability necessary, however, and to what extent do such fictions obscure important cross-cultural influences and exchanges?

In this case, for example, the sisters' movements aren't restricted to jobs and geography. Their shifting positions both evidence and facilitate concurrent ideological mobility, fueling a constant diversification of apostolates. Understanding what it means to be a Missionary Benedictine sister, then, entails some consideration of the ways in which the lives of the nuns are simultaneously defined by and transcendent of not only spatial and sometimes temporal but also psychological and cultural borders and boundaries. While self-disciplinary of its own membership and its member's use of space and time, the congregation also appears an organically extensive entity, overflowing the expected limits of its containment. Moreover, the crossings-over rendered possible because of the sisters' identification with something they believe in and of itself transcendent of human categories are coincident with a congregational interest in and appropriative engagement with difference, reflecting and reaffirming a significant flexibility and fluidity of faith. Such flexibility, in turn, is not only nourished by but also nourishes the Missionary Benedictines' radicalism, affording the sisters a broad awareness of religious and political alternatives that they have put to good use in critically reconfiguring their place and the meanings of womanhood within Philippine society.

THE PSYCHOSOMATICS OF JOB PLACEMENT

As intimated earlier, however, the rotation system also causes a good deal of frustration—not so much due to the fact of rotation itself, but rather due to individual positional dissatisfaction. Such dissatisfaction sometimes arises from real physical difficulties managing particular assignments, too. Sister Virginia, for example, found being vocation directress tough because it entailed constant travel and she was prone to very bad bouts of motion sickness. She was trying to deal with it by taking medicine, although she confessed that she might bring the problem to her superiors' attention if it became too hard to handle.

On the other hand, Sister Micha's complaints of physical problems due to her two-year job assignment as dean of student affairs at St. Scholastica's College were perhaps somewhat more obviously psychosomatic in character. She told me she had spent the first week of her job vomiting. Moreover, she claimed to have lost a full ten pounds in a mere month simply upon hearing she would be placed in the Dean's Office after a happier stint in Bacolod. And she professed to suffer from regular bouts of dizziness at the end of the school day, again faulting her work.

Nor was it insignificant that she attributed such physical distress to the deanship, in what seemed a strategic move, however subconscious. After all, she could not easily defy her superiors outright. Sister Micha was simply expected and was expected to expect herself to obey in the absence of serious justification for a change. To be sure, she could and did very vocally discuss her problems with the rotation—but even this, I think, was sticky for her. Notwithstanding her generally outspoken character, her very complaints were often ambivalent. She would talk of how busy she was and how she hated being put in the position of disciplinarian—and then back pedal, suddenly defensive not so much of her particular assignment but of her larger vocation and suddenly recalled both to her own relative privilege and her original aspirations to being Christlike.

If directly verbalizing her feelings about the assignment proved difficult, however, Sister Micha could effectively express her concerns through her corporeal state of being itself. In a sense, she could always plead a lack of control over such psychosomatics: although she was and would be held responsible for what she said and did, she could not as easily be held responsible for losing weight, vomiting, or having dizzy spells. Thus, such symptoms provided a means of making her unhappiness known without incurring guilt. How could she help what her body

did with anxiety? And how could she be faulted if she let her superiors know what was happening as a medical precaution?

Sister Micha wasn't above other subversive efforts, either. For example, she admitted to having explicitly asked for a reprieve from at least part of her deanship. Administrators are normally supposed to teach three to five units every semester. She had been able to get out of this particular requirement every second semester for the first two years of her posting, however, with her master's degree work at De La Salle University for justification.

Indeed, if Sister Micha didn't like the deanship, she wasn't much more enamored of teaching; while she complained of her work within the Student Affairs Office, she also complained of her past educational assignments. She had found teaching young children particularly difficult. Although she liked children very much and doted on her nieces and nephews, she somehow hadn't managed very well when assigned to the kinder school at St. Scholastica's Academy. Here, she told me, she was given responsibility for eight sections of forty children each, if only for twenty minutes at a time, because the children had short attention spans. It was simply too many children, too many times a day, and she had difficulty learning the requisite skills. The first week of school, she had a lesson plan all set, but they all just cried, calling "mommy, mommy," and faking illness in order to go home sooner. And the children weren't always disciplined. She would tell them to stand up, and they wouldn't stand up; she would tell them to settle down, and they wouldn't settle down.

Her classes sometimes went extremely slowly, too—twenty minutes can be long, she said. For example, she would have the kids sit on the floor while she read them stories. But the stories she read seemed to go faster than the clock. So she would resort to tricks such as turning the storybooks upside down, having told the class to keep their eye on a certain character in a certain picture. Then, they would cry out that it was the wrong way around! She would say, "No it's not," and they would insist. So she would say, "Well, what should I do?" They would reply, "turn it." She would turn it a bit, and say, "Is that right?" They would say, "No, more!" She would turn it ALL the way around, so it was still the wrong way, or at a strange angle, and say, "Is that right?" They would object again, and so on. And all of this simply to use up time! Just like having them line up—this took five minutes, and sometimes Sister Micha would capitalize on that in order to get through the day. Or she would take them out to the playground to learn sharing. She would say, "OK, you take turns on the swings and the seesaw," then sit down somewhere to

watch. But problems would arise. One of them would come up and say, "So and so isn't sharing the swing, she won't let me on." So Sister Micha would have to go to So and so and say, "How long have you been on the swing?" "Sister, I just got on." So she would try to get them to take turns pushing each other—which, she observed, wasn't always easy.

Luckily, however, that was just for one year; she wouldn't want to ever do it again. Rather, formation work was Sister Micha's alternative of choice. In fact, come spring, and thus come time for the convent superiors to make their annual assignment decisions, she said she was envisioning a transfer to the priory so hard it had to materialize. If not that, then something else, she said—she just didn't want to continue on as the dean of student affairs. Perhaps her persuasive tactics were effective, too, or perhaps her superiors simply decided it was time for a change: when the new rotations began on May 15, she was indeed placed in the main priory house to commence vocation work and continue her academic studies. And here, of course, she stopped suffering from dizzy spells and began sporting a brighter smile.

PERFORMANCE PUNISHMENT

Likewise, Sister Josephine wore her happiness in very visible fashion on her face when, come March, she too was informed that she would be given—or allowed to keep—the assignment for which she had been hoping. She, too, had been worried about the possibility of being placed in administration—although, the alternative she aspired to was not formation work but, rather, the very sorts of instructorships Sister Micha wanted to avoid. In fact, when I met Sister Josephine, she had been specifically placed in the school as a teacher for the first time in her convent career, and, notwithstanding her eventual health complaints, she signaled her job satisfaction with reference to her physical well-being:

I'm so happy about it. . . . I'm just enjoying every minute, every day of it. It's like vacation! Even the checking of two hundred-plus papers, preparing the grades. . . . Everybody sees how happy I look! I say, I'm on vacation! Even my mom and my sister, they noticed. "You've gotten fat, you've gained weight. . . ." I guess I'm fat! That's the first time you don't see me looking harassed, pressured. . . . I'd rather be a teacher, just teach full time.

Her concerns about the possibility of being assigned to administrative work instead were quite understandable, however, given her history. While she had planned on teaching math before entry, she's always been placed as a principal or directress within the congregation, and she has not particularly enjoyed these positions. When I first asked her about her past rotations, she responded by wrinkling up her face and sticking out her tongue: "Now that I'm here, I don't want to go back. . . . I don't want to go back to being a principal."

But she expected she'd have to do just that, eventually, because she was good at it:

I call that performance punishment. They put me in a problem, [and] after two years, they saw that the problem was better. I try to do the best that I can. If I just sit back and try to be deaf and dumb and mute and blind I can do anything. . . . The least that we can stay in a place is three years. . . . But it's never happened to me yet that I was there for three years—always two. In two years one can more or less spot the problem and do something about it. And whoever is going to come in after two years—the problem is a little bit better. So it would be smooth working now—just follow up what I began. Almost always, those who took my place would say "Thank you" for what I did. But I tell myself, if you only knew—if I had a choice, I'd rather not be there.

DEMOCRATIZING AUTHORITY

Of course, the promise of a post of preference (if not simple relaxation) upon retirement at sixty renders the nuns' assignments more palatable, a matter of deferred rewards for women whose theology is anyway in many ways founded on the promise of the future. But the sisters' hardships with obedience are also ameliorated in part by the possibility of participating more generally in important congregational decisions concerning both convent government and the Missionary Benedictine constitutions. Indeed, while obviously hierarchical in structure, the Missionary Benedictines are also very democratic in many respects. Even Sister Josephine admitted to me in the midst of her complaints that the convent government was not really so dictatorial after all. At least in comparison to the past, she said, there is now greater participation from the rank and file and greater freedom in the

individual houses—making, in her opinion, for a more creative and challenging life.

Moreover, the congregation superiors' authority is tempered by the impermanence of their positions. While the prioress is responsible for choosing her own assistants, and they are in turn responsible for making other positional assignments, the structure of the Missionary Benedictine government insures the relatively frequent democratic election of new congregation authorities, thereby allowing the sisters some control over their superiors and prohibiting overly dictatorial sisters from retaining power. For example, a new Philippine prioress is selected every five years at what the nuns term "election chapters," during which everyone is asked to submit nominations. The priory government processes the nominations and then sends them to the congregation headquarters in Rome. Those names with the most nominations are announced and prayed over, and final votes are cast during Mass—the sister with the greatest number winning the post.

The election of the mother general is similarly democratic, if a more extensive undertaking involving representatives from all the different Missionary Benedictine provinces in the world. It was with great excitement, too, that the Philippine congregation announced the election of the first Filipina—and first non-German—mother general during my tenure in the field. The newly appointed sister was well liked and had previously been elected prioress of the Philippine province. Her instatement as the Missionary Benedictine general was received in Manila not only as a vote for her as a person, however, but also as a vote for the Philippines, for Asia, and for the Third World in general. The German province, many of my informants suggested, was now growing increasingly obsolete, and the Philippines was replacing it as a global congregational center.

The priory government was undergoing revision in other respects, too. While the entire congregation maintains a prototypical international constitution, it has been adapted to the different cultures and countries in which Missionary Benedictine communities have been established. What's more, neither the international version nor its provincial manifestations are by any means unalterable. Every few years, the entire congregation holds a General Chapter, or general meeting, in Rome. Here, representatives from all Missionary Benedictine provinces assemble in order to review and revise their global code. The different provinces then convene Echo Chapters in order to determine how to apply decisions made in Italy to their more local

contexts. The Philippine Missionary Benedictines, for example, held a weeklong echo chapter at the end of April—prior to which all sisters were encouraged to compose position papers on congregation policies of concern. Moreover, after the meeting, every community was once more asked for input and suggestions with respect to the proposed alterations.

Once such changes are agreed upon, it is up to each sister individually to take responsibility for instituting them in her own sphere of work. After all, as indicated earlier, although pledged to obedience, all professed Missionary Benedictines retain a good deal of independence within their assignments. Again, being Missionary Benedictine is not just prohibitive; rather, it involves the active application of congregational values to positional requirements through personal initiative.

Take the congregation's academies, for example. The schools are supposed to be "evangelizing communities" focused on social action as much as theory. During the tenure of my fieldwork, for instance, St. Scholastica's mission theme was "academic excellence as social responsibility." And, precisely because of this, Sister Josephine observed, it was important to have sisters administering the apostolate:

We have a thrust—a mission statement that's an objective for the entire priory—a congregational thrust, and a thrust for the Philippine priory. So we tried to adjust this and adapt it to our institutional objectives. The objectives of the school should be in accordance or in line with the mission statement of the congregation and the priory. . . . And we are trying now to redefine what it means to be Benedictine and Missionary, and we are trying to put into the curriculum our values, to our students, our faculty, and our staff—the Benedictine values, like, for example, prayer, work, and the balance of prayer and work. Then you have hospitality, [and] we are sure that we want to have the option for the poor. In the Philippines, this is a must. . . . Sometimes the lay who are not Benedictine trained—they did not study with the Benedictine Sisters and would have a very difficult time trying to implement this, to put it in the curriculum, and trying to make plans for activities for the students and the faculty and staff to bring this about. . . . Whereas if a sister is going to be the administrator—the head of the school, the directress or the president and the two principals—it's going to be easier. So up to now, we hold that we are the directress and the principals and the treasurer. The rest can be lay.

PRINCIPAL PERSUASIONS

Sister Josephine was one to speak, too, given her typecast twenty-two year convent career as an administrator at ten different schools. And, much as she personally disliked such work, it was evident that she took her managerial duties seriously. She made it her business to know what was going on with her students—personally interviewing applicants, sending them to guidance counselors for screening, monitoring their progress after admission, and establishing remedial work routines for those in danger of failing. Moreover, while subject to the authority of community superiors who had to be informed of her intentions as a matter of etiquette, she used her power as an administrator to implement new policies and deal with difficulties as she saw fit. Sometimes, this meant dealing with mundane things like budget problems, which, as a nun trained to poverty, she found relatively easy to manage: “To me, money is not the particular problem. . . . It can be spotted and remedied. You can just cut down on expenses, be a little bit frugal, or appropriate funds properly.”

But Sister Josephine also talked of “more difficult . . . problems of relationship.” As principal and directress, for example, she had been responsible for observing the teachers she supervised, which had been touchy. She had done her best to make the situation more comfortable for them, telling them she wasn’t there to criticize but to help them build on their good points. Despite her best efforts, however,

even the assistant teachers would get so scared. That’s why I tell them, if I come to your class, you put on lipstick so you don’t look pale in front of the class as if you’re being watched. I had a teacher before, she had to go in and out of the classroom and go to the comfort room, because she was so nervous. . . . Some teachers had upset stomachs.

Thus, she had begun exploring the idea of implementing more peer observation instead. It was less threatening, she noted, when teachers observed one another, as happened at St. Scholastica’s. In fact, she generally favored cooperative team efforts between faculty and staff at the congregations’ schools, reflecting the strong emphasis placed on collective action within the larger congregation.

In short, Sister Josephine constructed herself not so much as a disciplinarian primarily concerned with the organizational duties of administration as a benevolent adviser skilled at listening to others and con-

cerned with the interests of the entire group, not unlike the convent superiors and formators. While the Missionary Benedictines are trained to value cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts early on in formation, however, the importance congregation members place on group harmony is also quite Philippine in many ways. Admittedly, the notion of *pakikisama*—getting along with others—has been overemphasized by scholars of Filipinos culture. Not all Filipinos are by any means primarily motivated by an overwhelming desire to preserve good relations with others. On the other hand, early sociological attempts to define the Filipino character have left a rather ironic legacy; the very idea that *pakikisama* is central to Philippine social life has now become integral to internalized national stereotypes. And making at least nominal gestures of compliance and friendship often does facilitate conflict resolution, whereas the failure to at least pretend to care about getting along is liable to engender new difficulties.

Insofar as getting things done in the Philippines typically entails networking, then, Sister Josephine's focus on establishing good rapport with her underlings and Sister Mary Peter's attempts to do the same as both subprioress and junior directress make perfect administrative sense as a prerequisite to the successful implementation of policy. Persuasion, here, is of more importance than mere position. What's more, the most successful boss is arguably she who, like the patrons of old, is good to her charges—and thus, playing on longtime (if again probably overemphasized) Philippine models of the successful patron-client relationship, able to invoke *utang na loob*. Nor should it be forgotten that Philippine women in particular are expected to be supportive and sensitive to the feelings of others. While it is still relatively unusual to find Filipinas in top administrative posts, then, the nuns are still enacting expected gender roles insofar as they pride themselves on being good listeners.

INTERROGATING STUDENT AFFAIRS

Sister Josephine wasn't the only one to discuss administrative complications with me, however; SSC's dean of student affairs, Sister Micha was also charged with implementing college policies in ways furthering the objectives of the Missionary Benedictines. For example, she was trying to get the various student groups for which she was responsible to follow the congregation's election procedures in choosing their officers. In part, this was because she felt it important that the students

learn to be democratic, but she also wanted them to consider incorporating periods of prayer and discernment into the process in order to clarify their goals, focus on their own mission work, and more easily resolve internal conflicts.

On the other hand, Sister Micha was also involved in and kept busy by what appeared to be a rather extensive bureaucracy. She was expected to process lots of paperwork, organize events, and police the students and school grounds. Indeed, if she was intent on persuading me of the importance of her religious training to her position when I began interrogating her administrative power, she was also invested in the somewhat tongue-in-cheek display of her busyness. Unlike the college faculty, who shared a large and open room with several desks, Sister Micha had a personal office. We often interviewed here and virtually always met here, affording me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the sister's everyday surroundings. I usually found her in a high-backed and comfortably cushioned chair behind her desk, completing letters, making last-minute phone calls, or signing the myriad documents cluttering her desk: recommendation forms, letters of appreciation concerning the school's para-Olympics and teacher's day celebrations, something like three hundred diplomas to be signed, two calendars of school activities, and an extensive list of graduating students. Four metal, wheeled file boxes further testified to the amount of paperwork for which she was responsible. "You see," the sister observed, only half joking, "I don't even always have time to look at what I have to." Nor was this an idle complaint: although she had a lay secretary to help keep things organized, she often had to work late into the night.

Nevertheless, the room was not just an administrative space. While it was by no means a permanent office, Sister Micha had still personalized her surroundings. The sister's desk boasted three baskets—an in basket, an out basket, and another, the fullest of the lot, captioned "Never Mind." In addition, a large button nearby displayed the message: "Tell me again how LUCKY I am to have this job . . . *I keep forgetting.*" A plastic-covered picture of Mary and the baby Jesus graced one wall, too and a wooden cabinet standing stalwart to one corner was decorated with assorted nostalgic pieces the sister was apparently keeping on hand, at least for this rotation, to brighten her office: a miniature wooden rocking chair, a browning bonsai plant, photos in a small frame, a seashell of rather impressive size, and some artificial roses in a vase. Then, there were other decorations more suggestive of her ideology. A poster hung on one wall read, "Where there is faith there is God, where there is God

there is love, where there is love there is peace, where there is peace there is no need . . .” Another behind the desk bore the more overtly radical message: “When I give money to the poor they call me a saint; when I ask why the poor are poor they call me a communist”—a subtle form of chastisement obviously directed toward St. Scholastica’s rich and privileged students, whom the school was explicitly attempting to educate about issues of class.

If the sister’s authority was intended to be benevolently instructive (like the authority of the convent superiors), though, she was also charged with enforcing disciplinary policies, and at least some of the Scholasticans begrudged her this duty. Indeed, while Sister Micha appeared to have good working and joking relationships with the many SSC girls who routinely hailed her when we walked the school halls together, she confessed to having become quite discouraged about an anonymous student who had called to harass her. Unfortunately, she hadn’t been able to identify the caller in order to arrange a meeting with her in person. The girl had given a fake name and had sounded as if she was covering the mouthpiece to muffle her voice, although Sister Micha had repeatedly suggested she speak up. What’s more, the caller had outright told the sister to get out of St. Scholastica’s. Sister Micha had responded that she would love to do so—she found it so tiresome working with unappreciative students who didn’t want to learn and didn’t care about anything. Could they write a petition to get her out? But they would have to very precisely state why; what specifically was objectionable here?

It turns out the caller was unhappy about the skirt policy—one of those things the sister rather reluctantly had to enforce as dean. St. Scholastica’s requires its elementary school, high school, and college students to wear strictly regulated uniforms. While the elementary uniform consists of navy blue jumper dresses and white blouses, however, the older girls have some choice—relatively unusual in religious-run Philippine academies. Above a couch conveniently positioned by the glass-windowed reception area outside Sister Micha’s office, both sample Scholastican clothing and a poster listing specifications could be found on apparently permanent display: the no-matter-what white button-down blouses with pleats spaced half an inch apart and a blue embroidered St. Scholastica’s logo, the requisite three-panel must-be-worn-below-the-knee one-pocket A-line skirts of blue gabardine, and optionally, the obviously more popular, if unfashionably high-waisted, blue gabardine, blue-buttoned pants.

The dress code isn’t intended merely as a hegemonic exercise,

either. The nuns want their students wearing uniforms, Sister Micha noted, in order to deemphasize the importance of appearance and to help minimize the gap between the rich and the poor. Filipinos can be very fashion conscious, leaving poorer students who can't afford the more fashionable foreign-made clothes sold at exorbitant prices in the air-conditioned malls at a definite disadvantage. With the uniform policy, though, everyone wears the same thing, down to the minor details, arguably deflating student competition through the conspicuous display of the latest labels. Recalling the rationale for the Missionary Benedictines' own unvaried habits, the point is not so much to coordinate classroom colors as to move away from a concern with dress as a measure of personal worth or the locus of material desire.

If the uniform policy was instituted to deemphasize fashion within St. Scholastica's walls, however, like many such policies it was obviously now in danger of being taken as an object of importance in and of itself in isolation from its original purpose. Sister Micha told me that the regulations recently had been expanded because, she somewhat apologetically explained, some of the other administrators had begun pressuring her to add to the already highly detailed code. While the students used to be allowed to wear pants whenever they wished, the school government was now requiring all college students to wear skirts at least one day of the week. "Why?" I asked. Well, Sister Micha said, pointing to the somewhat cryptic etymological note she had made, complete with a sheepish smiley face, on the specification list, "uniform means same form," and the administrators felt it important that everyone come to school dressed in the same thing at least some of the time. What's more, they had made the decidedly unpopular choice to measure such uniformity in skirts instead of the preferred pants—never mind that their decision appeared in some respects to be a throwback to traditional cultural expectations of womanhood.

Consequently, Sister Micha had monitored the gate the first week of the second term, personally refusing entrance to every girl not dressed in a skirt. Unfortunately, there had been a lot of them, doubtless including the aforementioned caller. But, while all this seemed rather strict to me for the first Wednesday of the semester, the sister maintained that her actions had been necessary to get the students to take the policy seriously. Otherwise, they would wear pants on purpose, excusing themselves with the claim that they simply forgot.

If only they knew, though, that she didn't like being rigid about the rule; the administration "made her." Indeed, in private, Sister Micha confessed to significant insecurity concerning the way in which she had

handled the situation. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so harsh on the students? And the caller. It had sounded as if the girl really didn't like her, and she certainly didn't want anyone to hate her. What if this was the girl with polio who had asked for an exemption? The sister had responded that she couldn't make any exceptions—if she exempted one, she would have to exempt others, and she felt it important for the girl to learn to live with her physical difference rather than being ashamed of it. But maybe she should have been more forgiving?

Of course, Sister Micha had attempted to make the policy a bit more palatable by giving the students the option of wearing skirts two days a week on days they chose or of wearing skirts once a week on a day she picked. When they voted for the latter, she had picked Wednesday in an attempt to be fair: it was the one day that most students had classes. Moreover, the sister remarked, it was as petty for the students to be so resistant to the rule as it was for the nuns to enforce it. It was just a dress code, after all, not something truly detrimental to the students' lives. Or so, Sister Micha said, she had tried to tell the caller. And the girl hadn't been able to formulate any good response beyond complaining, Sister Micha noted with perhaps just a hint of pride, that she was sarcastic. So she had scolded the caller, telling her she had better come up with more specifics if she wanted to change the way things were done.

She had a point, too—but the conflict also underlines the fact that the Missionary Benedictines operate according to a different system of values than that of many of their students, who are, by and large, invested in their appearance. One of the college women I befriended told me that most of her peers had fashion photos of themselves plastered all over their notebooks. It is no wonder, then, that the uniform rule grated on them, and especially the skirt rule, skirts being taken as “old fashioned” in contrast to the “hip,” “modern,” urban, westernized, and rather ironically very conformist look of pants (U.S.-made jeans being particularly desirable). The sisters, on the other hand, all happily wear skirted uniforms themselves, not only claiming religious justification for the habit, but also claiming it more freeing than constraining. Furthermore, convent opinion in general runs against the clothing industry, which the nuns criticize for playing on vanity, contributing to the association of beauty with female self-worth, feeding on greed, fueling conspicuous consumption, and taking time and energy away from more important things.

It is worth noting, too, that the nuns are very much invested in the idea of obedience as a matter of humility and faith within the convent context. In being strict about the skirt policy, then, Sister Micha was

really simply applying to her charges the standards she sets for herself. She was obeying her superiors by policing the students, with her strictness marking the extent of her own obedience. Again, for the sisters, the exercise of administrative power is not just about administration itself but always represents, first and foremost, a means of enacting and actualizing Missionary Benedictine values. The ultimate justification for Sister Micha's behavior, then, lies in her congregation membership.

PAPAL EXCESS AND PRIVATE PROTEST

On the other hand, while actually quite loyal to her Missionary Benedictine superiors despite her self-identification as a rebel, Sister Micha didn't credit the Vatican such respect. As SSC's dean of student affairs, the sister became heavily involved with the school's World Youth Day (WYD) activities. WYD is a rather extensive Catholic Church production put on every four years at a different international site, during which young Catholics from around the world convene to develop mission statements and reaffirm their faith in a global forum. The idea is both to strengthen youth involvement in the church itself and, arguably, to publicly display the sheer numbers of the faithful as an index of the power and continuing relevance of Catholicism in the modern day.

Although most Manileños with whom I talked seemed to think it an honor to have had the Pope choose their hometown as host for the event, however, accommodating the anticipated influx was no small task. A great deal of preparation was necessary, much of it done by area Catholic schools and religious congregations. In fact, Catholic academies nationwide extended their Christmas breaks by several weeks in order to make room for the international delegates and give local youth, not to mention the local populace in general, the opportunity to join in on the much-hyped January celebration.

But that wasn't all. Organizing work on WYD was initiated almost a full year prior to the actual event, and Sister Micha was recruited by a subcommittee charged with arranging the texts for the concluding liturgy. In part, this meant submitting a program to the larger WYD committee, the Catholic Bishops' Council of the Philippines, and finally Rome for endorsement. While the committee put a lot of work into the liturgy, however, it was virtually unrecognizable by the time the endorsements were completed. In fact, only two pieces were retained—the release of doves and the prefatory texts. Rome vetoed the plan to

have representative youth receive special blessings during the Mass in favor of more traditional blessing rites—the “approved version,” the sister said with a sarcastic smile. Likewise, the Vatican vetoed the suggestion that they have a more participatory Eucharist, with laypersons assigned various parts in the rites. Again, the “approved version” won out. Nor were they the only ones to experience problems of this sort. Asked to compose participatory pieces, the musicians spent a good deal of time drafting songs with antiphonal and choir parts, but many of their compositions were ultimately vetoed despite the hours choruses all over the Philippines had spent practicing. It was remarkable and certainly admirable, Sister Micha observed, that the priest responsible for many of the new numbers kept his cool when told of the decision.

The work didn’t stop once the general outline of WYD was established, either. Rome still wanted a detailed time-and-motion scenario, meaning that Sister Micha’s group had to account for every minute of the liturgy from 8:30 A.M. to 11:45 A.M. Even the dancers’ movements had to be plotted out. And the subcommittee had less than a week to complete the scenario, the monsignors from Rome having suddenly decided that they needed copies as soon as possible. Sometimes, Sister Micha added, the officials of the church simply didn’t seem to realize that the rest of them had their own lives and responsibilities.

Then, come November, one of the monsignors announced that the welcome liturgy would have to be canceled because of the Pope’s ill health—the Pope’s doctors said he couldn’t take so much activity in one day. The priest in charge of that particular portion of WYD just smiled, but, as with the music, it was a blow. While the ceremonies planned for the welcome would still be performed before the opening liturgy at 4:00 and before the youth vigil, the Pope wouldn’t see any of the pageantry, and no one from the Vatican appeared to recognize how much work had gone into the planning.

Sister Micha’s group ran into problems, too, when the monsignor reviewing their work said he didn’t want a gap between the end of the Pope’s homily and the dancing: he wanted the dancer ready to perform immediately after the Pope finished talking. How they would know when the Pope was about to finish? The monsignor simply replied that they should trust in the Holy Spirit—and, Sister Micha said, that was just about the last straw for her. She hadn’t been able to keep from exclaiming, “Yes, Monsignor, let’s order one Holy Spirit from Rome, please!” Of course, this only elicited reproving glances from the others, so she quieted down—but at least she got it out.

And at least they were all vindicated, after a fashion, when the time-

and-motion scenario ultimately proved useless. For one thing, the security officers responsible for regulating the traffic of people at the event simply couldn't clear various areas meant to be set aside for special uses. They only knew how to clear crowds when there was a riot and they could use violence, she wryly joked. Furthermore, the Mass was a full two hours late, and the identification passes supposedly necessary for access to the stage turned out to be of little use. In fact, although the sisters went to Luneta early, they were harassed by the presidential security group. While they were supposed to be involved in the liturgy and thus were supposed to be on the grandstand, security made them move—the problem really being that others, many of whom didn't have passes, were occupying the sisters' assigned places. Sister Micha asked the intruders to vacate the stolen seats, but by the time some of them agreed to do so, the rest of the Missionary Benedictines had been relocated, and she couldn't get them back up to reclaim their rightful positions.

There were other problems, too. A million missalettes detailing the text of the Mass had been printed, but no one could figure out how to distribute them, so only people close to the stage got copies. And the programs weren't even accurate. They contained the wrong psalm because the monsignor in charge had forgotten to inform the Pope of a change in the responsorial, and the Pope had written his homily around the old one. And the monsignor's absentmindedness meant that the choir of 750 (plus 200 in the orchestra) had to prepare themselves for a new program with little time to spare. It made her want to write a letter to the Pope saying, "Do you know what your monsignor just told us, that one thousand of us have to change what we've been planning and practicing because he made a mistake?" It would have been so much easier, Sister Micha observed, if the Pope, who was just one man, had instead composed a new homily. But the Church didn't work that way: it was still all top-down even when and where everyone was supposed to be celebrating the faith of lay youth.

Not that anyone seemed to remember that this was meant for the youth in the first place—the public was too hyped about the Pope, a popular cultural hero. All the Pope's homilies were printed in the papers, whereas the media ignored the commitment statement of the International World Youth. At least the Scholasticans set a good example of a viable communal effort: everyone cooperated in showing hospitality to the foreigners staying at SSC. Most of the country and a good many of the Vatican officials on site appeared oblivious to the fact that the Pope was in Manila because of WYD though, instead of the other way around.

ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURAL APOSTOLATES

While thoroughly critical of the Church bureaucracy, however, Sister Micha claimed the Missionary Benedictines actively concerned about relevance to the Philippine people. For example, she told me, the congregation was making efforts to establish a new agricultural apostolate in Mindanao. Agriculture has long been a mainstay of the Philippine provincial economy in general and of Mindanao's economy in specific, but farming simply is no longer as lucrative as city work or factory work—nor is it very high status, partly precisely because at such a remove from the global marketplace represented by Metro Manila and the West. Thus, the point of the agricultural apostolate was not the introduction of something completely new but instead the revaluation of traditional means of making a living. The sisters were hoping to encourage the people of Mindanao to expand their agricultural resources rather than migrating to Luzon or working for EPZs (export processing zones). The latter are particularly bad because most of the multinational companies responsible for setting up large factories in the Philippines have little or no regard for the environment or for their employees' welfare. The local laborers they recruit are usually poorly compensated and often subjected to horrendous working conditions, Sister Micha observed; moreover, fragile local ecosystems are often destroyed by EPZ construction and output. If rural residents could be trained in new, more profitable, and more efficient farming methods, however, perhaps more sustainable agricultural economies could be developed.

Sister Micha personally thought an agricultural apostolate was needed in Negros, too—or at least Bacolod, where she had been stationed for two years. In Bacolod, she had taught second-year religion on the high school faculties of two very different Missionary Benedictine-run schools, St. Scholastica's Academy of Bacolod and the Holy Family Vocational High School. The students attending the former were much like those attending St. Scholastica's College in Manila—by and large quite privileged. Indeed, all rich students in Bacolod studied at the Academy, the local De La Salle, or a branch of Assumption, all private institutions run by monastic religious groups and linked to mother institutions of the same name in Metro Manila.

On the other hand, the Holy Family was a free school funded by the Human Development Foundation (HDF), an organization begun during the German Missionary Benedictine Sisters' time in affiliation with a German group desirous of helping out needy Philippine students.

The HDF still subsidized tuition and fees for the poor, meaning that the Holy Family student body was very different from that of St. Scholastica. These were the children of manual laborers and domestic servants. In fact, precisely because it was oriented toward Bacolod's working class, the Holy Family had originally been constructed as a girls' vocational institute to teach sewing and cooking to prospective housemaids. Fortunately, the place was now a regular high school instead; the Missionary Benedictines had realized their mistake in providing the Holy Family students a very different education than that provided their Scholastican peers.

Not that there isn't still a large market for domestic service in the Philippines.⁸ And, admittedly, it can pay enough to make it worth it by comparison to the relatively few other occupational possibilities open to impoverished young women. From the point of view of privilege, however, maids are sorely underpaid. Consider, for instance, the Seth household. Every month, Mrs. Seth gleaned ten thousand pesos (roughly four hundred dollars) from the apartment I rented from her; moreover, she had additional monthly income from other renters and from her work in the appliance business. During the tenure of my field-work alone, this enabled her to buy not only an expensive new car for her oldest son, but also a new computer with a CD drive and good memory, for which she paid thousands of pesos in cash.

Yet while Mrs. Seth apparently thought little of such extravagant purchases, she constantly complained to me how much it cost to have domestic help. It was hard, she would tell me, because a new law had recently come into effect setting the minimum wage for such service at a thousand pesos a month (roughly forty dollars). On top of that, she observed, one had to provide room and board. Never mind that, in this case, the room in question was only five feet by seven feet, with a single bed for two inside and no lock on the door; never mind that the board Mrs. Seth offered her domestics consisted primarily of the family's left-overs, served in the kitchen only after everyone else had had their fill. Nor was Mrs. Seth very appreciative of the fact that her servants routinely rose at 4:00 or 4:30 A.M. to cook a hot breakfast for every member of the household, often specifically to order (Arjun, in particular, often requested very specific alternatives to the food at hand). Then, after the children had gone to school, the family's domestics spent a good portion of their day washing the Seths' laundry in big plastic tubs, ironing the wrinkles out of every last T-shirt, and cleaning the house of the black dirt that settled over every visible surface with remarkable tenacity. They were not allowed to leave the house unless explicitly

ordered (or occasionally given permission) to do so, either. And they weren't permitted any real breaks; rather, they were on call at all hours and were expected to provide immediate assistance should any of the Seths get hungry in the middle of the night, want more towels while showering, or need help with homework.

From my perspective, a thousand pesos a month was hardly sufficient recompense for such services, whether or not the maids themselves thought it a good deal. Admittedly, I come from a different cultural context wherein domestic helpers are not a regular part of middle-class life. Still, it isn't as if the profession offers any possibility for advancement, job security, or medical benefits. Moreover, while the room and board Mrs. Seth provided may have been luxurious for many of the women she hired in comparison to what they were used to (after all, the Seths had a television, air-conditioning in the main room, carpeted floors, and a refrigerator), being a live-in maid also means living at a sometimes significant distance from one's own family, and this in a family focused culture. In other words, it is a vocation of necessity far more than choice, and, although perhaps ostensibly a gesture of charity, training poor women to domestic service only keeps them poor, in highly disciplined fashion.

In addition, such training reinstates and reinscribes problematic gender norms. While even unskilled working-class Philippine men can aspire to be jeepney drivers, plumbers, or security guards, poor women, as one of the Seths' domestic helpers observed, are still widely understood to have only two options—domestic service or prostitution. And the equation of the former with women's work simply underlines the point that Philippine women are still very much relegated to the domestic sphere, although working as a chauffeur, carpenter, or farmer might be both more appealing to and more lucrative for many working-class Filipinas.

Unfortunately, however, the entire process of revamping the Holy Family curriculum in order to correct such class and gender biases—and afford working class youth of *both* sexes access to an *academic* education as good as that offered at any other Missionary Benedictine school—wasn't going exactly as planned. The Holy Family students were becoming increasingly profit oriented. Many were going on to get their college degrees and then finding work as accountants or bankers, and so forth, outside Bacolod, in larger urban centers. And, while this initially appears a positive indicator of the nuns' success in helping their graduates better their lives, the sisters had recently begun questioning the extent to which they were helping to build the community as a

whole. Were they simply training an entire generation to middle-class ambitions and providing them the means and desire to migrate to the city rather than the incentive to become more productive and responsible members of their hometown? Most Holy Family students' parents were farmers: what did it mean to the future of the place if their children were beginning to disdain agriculture as a vocational option? Was this really the best way to narrow the gap between the rich and poor?

These were serious questions, Sister Micha observed. Many of the Holy Family students felt their parents' lives were too difficult: farming was no longer attractive because quite simply lacking in sufficient material compensation for more worldly tastes. And it was not just that they wanted to make money. They now appeared to be developing something of what the sister termed a "colonial mentality," adopting the Western-oriented values espoused by their more privileged peers. Many of them were learning to ooh and aah over things American and to aspire to eventual emigration to the States, with the all-too-popular Filipino conviction that the United States represents a modern land of plenty one step up from even Metro Manila.

Such student aspirations, given the glimpse of opportunity, are understandable precisely because typical of a more generalized and, for the sisters, highly problematic, Western bias in the Philippines, extending all the way up to the president. Sister Josephine explicitly complained that then President Fidel Ramos was failing to attend to the needs of the Philippine people as a whole because more concerned with Western attitudes and the Philippines' global position than with domestic problems: "It's obvious that Ramos is an American boy, and it's what the Americans tell us should go on here—it's not really what the Filipino people should have and need. That is awful, you know."

If Ramos represents a particularly public and visible example of the Filipino "colonial mentality," however, the Missionary Benedictines complained of other examples of Filipino susceptibility to foreign influences, too. Recall Sister Micha's concerns about multinationals in the Philippines, for example. Many of the sisters also suggested to me that U.S. businesses were at fault for contributing to the materialism of the country's youth, a materialism too often serving outside interests due to the higher value placed on goods made outside the country. The nuns didn't think the Philippines should be exporting its own top merchandise to America and Europe, either. But "export quality" essentially means "highest quality" in the Philippines: Filipinos generally hold goods made and sold for internal consumption to be inferior. Then, too, Filipinos popularly idolize American film, music, and sports

stars, and, for that matter, both exhibit an arguably racist admiration for pale skin and attach higher status to the English language than to indigenous dialects.⁹ As Sister Jacoba observed, it was highly disheartening to see such “foreign domination still in the Philippines in spite of the fact that we have ‘independence’ in quotation marks.”

No wonder, then, that the Missionary Benedictines are concerned about having facilitated their Holy Family students’ abdication of community and national responsibility in providing them with increased educational opportunities. No wonder, too, that Sister Micha was now advocating instead exploring, and schooling the Bacolod poor in, ways of making farming more profitable. While her suggestion is somewhat suspect in once again effectively limiting working class vocational choices (and thus reinscribing class difference in Bacolod), I understood her point. In the sisters’ eyes, teaching youth to farm is not the same as teaching poor women domestic servitude; agriculture, from the Missionary Benedictine perspective, is in fact an exalted vocation—one they would happily teach their elite students, too, would the elite only recognize the worth of such work. The problem, here, lay in persuading others of the very value the congregation itself places on farming, however. In the Holy Family case, such persuasion might be interpreted as the imposition of convent morality on a captive audience; after all, Sister Micha, at least, was too convinced of the importance of agricultural apostolates to acknowledge the hegemony of her own intentions. Although quite willing to acknowledge that most of the Holy Family students would probably be resistant to farming careers, she nevertheless felt educating them to farm profitably would be more in line with the congregations’ mission than simply running a free high school. Others could manage the regular schools, she explained, while the sisters turn their attention to making agriculture economically feasible not only in Minanao, but also Bacolod.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

The Missionary Benedictines are fighting the ills of development elsewhere, too. During the 1980s an explicit commitment to environmentalism was incorporated into the sisters’ constitution. Since then, Missionary Benedictines have placed signs all over the Manila college grounds and classrooms reminding their students to be “clean and green.” In addition, at least some of the SSC faculty are trying to teach the Scholasticans to avoid ecologically damaging behavior: Carmen, a

women's studies and theology professor, explicitly forbids the use of aerosol cans of hair spray in her classroom, for instance. The nuns themselves have also become more and more interested in making use of natural imagery in their spiritual practice, with a newfound conviction that nature is in fact sacred.

And much of this is apparently due to Sister Sylvia, the Missionary Benedictines' environmental "expert." She effectively introduced environmentalism to the Philippine congregation in the early 1980s and now heads a Missionary Benedictine-sponsored environmentalist center, the staff of which publishes a semiannual newsletter. Moreover, during the priory chapter, Sister Sylvia was assigned to assist the various Philippine apostolates in reviewing their methods in light of both growing concerns about the rise of commercialism and a renewed commitment to simplification as part of the ecological project. The sister also regularly attends informational (and often international) meetings about nuclear power and other environmental issues in the Pacific. She works with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), too, educating people about ecology and organic farming or helping them network with interested parish organizations to establish co-ops to fight against deforestation, for example. In addition, she is attempting to get the Philippine government to pay more attention to the environment and happily reported to me that the government had recently agreed to send representatives to Baguio for a national conference on ecology with which she was involved.

But, Sister Sylvia admitted, it had been an uphill battle. Although she had begun reading a good deal about rural development projects as a junior sister, her superiors had refused to allow her to get involved with such programs until fully professed. Luckily, once she got her ring she was rewarded for her patience with permission to go to the Zambales area, near Bataan, where she began working in conjunction with parish organizations in the area as the only Benedictine in a rather unusual intercongregational household of four nuns.¹⁰ And a good thing, too, she said, because she was needed. While she initially expected to assist with rural projects, she ended up getting involved in the controversy over a nuclear power plant being constructed in the village of Bataan. Originally, the plant had been destined for another community, which, according to her, had been given all sorts of government propaganda claiming it would provide new jobs and thus be a big boon to the local economy. So everyone had agreed to the facility. For some reason the original plan was changed, though, and the government decided to build in Bataan.

And that, Sister Sylvia said, was when she discovered why God had had her become a chemical engineer. This was shortly after the Three Mile Island incident, when people had just begun to realize how bad nuclear power plant accidents could be for both humans and the environment. Luckily, she was up on all of this, and, when asked to explain the plant to the local people as the closest thing to a resident expert (with the habit to guarantee her ethics), she spent a good deal of time discussing the dangers it might pose, eventually persuading the townsfolk they didn't want the facility in their area.

The government didn't really care how they felt, though. The townspeople were on the geographical margins of Philippine society and thus were expendable from the perspective of the national capital. Ignoring local wishes altogether, then, the administration went right ahead and authorized Westinghouse to continue the project.¹¹ In short, while Sister Sylvia cast the Bataan incident as an environmentalist affair, the prospective plant also became the locus of a struggle between provincial laborers and a bureaucracy intent on development at all costs.¹² And, as a good Missionary Benedictine, the sister began advocating for the disempowered.

Indeed, Sister Sylvia played a key role in resolving the conflict as a mediator between the province and the centralized national government, traversing the boundaries separating the two not only in a literal sense but also as someone able to manage and manipulate the respect of both sides. For one thing, she could throw her moral weight as a nun behind her convictions. What's more, given her mandated mobility, she could effectively argue a desire to serve the interests of the Philippines as a whole without being accused of personal geographical partiality. And the sisters enjoy wide-ranging access to resources not only across the nation but also overseas. In this particular instance, Sister Sylvia discussed the Bataan situation with a priest who communicated her concerns to an activist group in Holland. They in turn asked the U.S. Department of Forestry and Natural Resources for assistance, hoping that the U.S. government would pressure Westinghouse to stop construction. Bringing the matter to international attention eventually worked, too. In the end, the Philippine administration abandoned the facility; if the well-being of Bataan locals wasn't reason enough to cease building, concern about negative world press was. Not only was the West—signified by the perhaps appropriately named Westinghouse—partly to blame for the problem, but the West, in the form of both a Dutch collective and the United States, was also partly to thank for the solution.

POLITICAL HISTORY

Such political activism is nothing new for the nuns, either. According to Sister Jacoba, the Missionary Benedictines have long been concerned with underprivileged sectors of society:

Even in the beginning [1906], the sisters were always open to ministering to the poor. In fact, at the very opening of the school we were in a very small urban poor area of Manila. . . . With that, the heart beating for the poor . . . was already there . . . to go out of the four walls of the classroom and go out of the convent, and reach out to the poor according to the needs of the times. . . . Even in the provinces before, there were what they call missions in far out barrios where sisters stay overnight, [going on] carabao sled or horseback [to] teach the farmers, the mothers, [and] the children, then come back to the community.

Of course, as Sister Placid observed, the congregation's reform efforts initially amounted to little more than "a very limited kind of social service, . . . doing things for people . . . more like charity work." As previously indicated, however, the sisters began to radically review and renew their mission thrust during the Marcos years. Sister Jacoba explained,

In the '60s and '70s after Vatican II¹³ from the point of view of the Church, and then in the '60s, . . . particularly here in the Philippines, how could we concretize our solidarity with the poor, making their cries our cries? So if we do education, it should be justice oriented—in our schools. What about in our hospitals? . . . There were already some sisters who even in the schools were already participating, getting in contact with or starting to contact different sectors, [such as] the urban poor, who were being ejected from their places, because the government and the military and Imelda wanted to show tourists [that] this is a beautiful city, so they ejected the slum villages. Some of them came to priests and sisters for help, so this way we got to know the situation. Then some of the sisters were in the province—the situation with farmers, no land at all, being ejected—so you are working with them. How will that now affect your consciousness? How do you see this now, working for solidarity with the poor while keeping your life of prayer? . . . How does this now all get into your consciousness?¹⁴

The answer, for the Missionary Benedictines, lay in the development of a more explicitly activist agenda. The priory declared 1970 a social-action year, and many of the sisters began agitating for assignments allowing more direct involvement with marginalized sectors of society. For instance, Sister Placid, who outright identified herself as “a radical” and talked extensively about both her commitment to social work and her participation in mass action in protest of abusive governmental policies, decided “to enroll for a master’s in community development at the University of the Philippines [because I wanted] to have one foot in the priory and one foot in the streets, in the world.”

According to Sister Jacoba, the congregation established a new sociopastoral apostolate, too, to “help people become self-reliant, independent.” The apostolate was not narrowly conceived, either; as current head of the apostolate, Sister Jacoba explained that, even at the outset, it was

aimed at different sectors . . . farmers, urban poor, tribal Filipinos, women, community organizing, Basic Christian Communities, working for human rights, being supporters of people as they fight for their welfare and dignity, either being with them when they go to maybe the Senate to picket the legislature for laws that will benefit them, or joining them in a rally or demonstration—especially at the height of martial law— . . . against militarization or [destruction] of some forest or burnings of villages because they said there are insurgents there and so on.

Nor have the Missionary Benedictines grown any more complacent over the years. In fact, the sisters now have official sociopastoral centers in all their provincial houses, along with a central office which, Sister Jacoba told me, was responsible for the development of “programs and services to answer to the needs of the people—health, socioeconomic projects, organizing, . . . giving seminars and lectures.”

Not that the nuns see themselves as mere benevolent patrons, though. Overall, the sisters now generally appear to feel that charity only creates problematic dependencies; Sister Placid informed me they are now instead attempting to “facilitate people getting things done for themselves.” Sister Micha, for instance, was agitating for the development of new community-oriented projects on which the aforementioned Holy Family students could work in exchange for their stipends, rather than simply providing them their stipends on a “dole out system.”¹⁵ In addition, she wanted to see such subsidized schooling done

in a more collective fashion, with student funds pooled and distributed by democratic decision. Ideally, this would pave the way for further cooperation on a larger scale, contributing to community sustainability.

The sisters are attempting to combine the implementation of social programs and services with their educational efforts, too. Sister Placid, for instance, maintains an office in a building named Subiaco located across the street from the main priory grounds, where she serves as a resource for not only lay area residents, but also, she told me, SSC's faculty, staff, and student body.¹⁶ Not only is the social action center she runs is effectively a "venue, like a broker, which links up the outreach involvements here with peoples' organizations in the community;" center staff also coordinate activities to instruct SSC students in social work. According to the sister, the point is to create bridges between the college and the locals: her work is "two-pronged work—work directly with the people, and at the same time work within the school to draw [the students] towards service." And this, in her opinion, is particularly important now that "in the college of arts and sciences, there [is] a relatively new department opened under the social sciences—this [is] the bachelor of arts, major in social development and community organizing."

Nor is Subiaco just a training center for Scholasticans. Sister Placid, who professed herself committed to bringing the classroom into the streets as well as the streets into the classroom, envisions it as a place wherein activists outside the school community will eventually be able to obtain a formal education. This, she believes, will not only earn her compatriots the respect they deserve but also facilitate their activist efforts; in her opinion, learning how to organize material and theorize the social world is of not only academic but also political importance. Many of the lay organizers she knew, she told me, have

a lot of practice and knowledge, but they now want updating. . . .
Unfortunately, it's not possible for them to enroll in the regular classes, because they're working. And I don't want them to leave.
. . . We need as many people as possible doing work of these kinds.
So, what we are trying to do is devise a structure, an institute, like the Institute of Women's Studies, for example.

Here, she suggested, Philippine activists might be offered a wide range of course topics, covering all the standard material, if in a condensed format. Indeed, the sister and her staff were planning their own textbooks to that end:

It is possible—actually, we have done it already before—to cram everything you need to know about a certain subject offering, the most basic theory and its practicum, . . . into let’s say, two weeks—intensive. . . . It need not all be that particular subject only; you can have two or three subjects converging within the same two-week period. And then you earn your units for a degree for that. . . . For those who are in NGO work, who cannot afford to get away from their work for a longer period of time, that would be more practical. . . . You see, the concept is very attractive to a lot of people, also to our sisters, but the nitty-gritty of structuring it and getting all the faculty and making sure all the academic requirements are filled and then getting the go signal from the department of education, of course—if one wants the students to get a degree, one has to follow all the standard operation procedures.

POLITICIZING EDUCATION

Others of my informants evidenced a commitment to the politicization of education, too, even when not explicitly involved in the sociopastoral apostolate. While, like most Catholic academies in the Philippines, the Missionary Benedictines’ schools gained both an elite reputation and an elite clientele early on, partly due to high tuitions established in order to achieve and maintain congregational self-sufficiency, many of sisters assigned to teaching positions now believe it important to expose their students to less-privileged populations. Indeed, even during the Marcos years, according to Sister Jacoba, “some of the sisters who were in school . . . had the time to participate in mass actions of the people, even to the point of bringing their own students, . . . exposing them to the reality, discussing this in class, doing liturgy in this context and so on.”

Likewise, Sister Micha told me she made efforts to teach her elite St. Scholastica’s Academy students community responsibility while in Bacolod. Bacolod is in fact a city of the *nouveau riche*—rich, in this case, from farming sugar and then prawns, taking advantage of the cheap local labor. There is still tenant farming in the area, too—the tenants forever beholden to their landlords, making for a big economic gap between the two groups. And, as most of her academy students came from wealthy landowning families, Sister Micha assigned them “exposures” to talk with the poor.

Not that this had been easy. Many students weren't able to get parental permission because their parents believed the poor all involved in a "Red" conspiracy to undermine "the establishment." The underground communist movement in the Philippines was still very much alive in Negros at the time, the sister explained, partly precisely because the agricultural system remained very feudal. What's more, worried about their tenants organizing to take control of the land, the local elite supported military action against the communist rebels hiding in the surrounding mountains. Partly in response to pressure from local landowners, then, the government had initiated Operation Thunderbolt, which essentially amounted to indiscriminate bombing, forcing the poor to evacuate their hillside homes and farmlands whether involved with the rebels or not.

Indeed, thousands of refugees from the mountains—two hundred temporarily camped on church grounds for lack of anywhere else to go—had already been left virtually homeless because of such misplaced tactics by the time the sister arrived in Bacolod. Sister Micha took those of her students who obtained parental permission to visit the refugee centers, too. They heard the refugees' stories of having been driven away from their lands, and worse: one man had seen his whole family massacred; another had seen her father beheaded. There were also shell-shocked children who ran for cover whenever anyone in a uniform came around. And, afterward, the sister issued her classes a challenge: "What will you do about this?"

Notably, some students decided to write letters to the government, although, when it came to signing the letters, the forty who wrote went down to twenty because parental permission was again required, and many parents wouldn't let their children sign for fear, this time, that they would be staked out by rabidly anti-communistic elements. Not all the students themselves could get over the assumption that the refugees were communist, either—they had been too well-indoctrinated by government propaganda and couldn't get beyond their fears even when faced with real people simply talking about losing their homes. Even some of the desperately poor Holy Family students who had had their own parents killed didn't really get it: some of them still "saw red" when confronted with others like them. It was really all a big psychological war: the government claimed the communists would confiscate everyone's holdings and kill all landowners if ever able to gain power. Indeed, the sister remembered having been told such things herself when young—even that communists ate people! The sad thing was that all of this paranoia about the Reds effectively immobi-

lized the poor: they knew they might be killed at any time simply because assumed rebels and thus all too often took pains to distance themselves from any organizational efforts whatsoever. But there was at least some hope that some of her students would continue to agitate for social justice, perhaps someday even going beyond writing letters.

MAINTAINING BALANCE

Of course, if ongoing formation means getting involved in Philippine politics, the fully professed sisters remain committed to maintaining a balance between *ora et labora*. While individual sisters, not to mention individual houses operate according to varied work schedules, everyone, Sister Josephine assured me, makes efforts to set aside time for “morning prayer, Holy Mass, midday prayer, evening prayer, night prayer, and common adoration and meditation and the *lectio divina*—every day you have to do that.”

But what does “doing that” really mean to the sisters? As an agnostic with virtually no formal religious training, I admit I found the process of prayer rather mysterious. I could learn the mechanics—I could learn to make the sign of the cross with fingers dipped in holy water before entering the chapel; I could learn to bow respectfully with bent back before the altar and the blessed sacrament (in which the host is kept and wherein Christ resides by transubstantiation); and I could learn the rosary, on which Sister Virginia gave me lessons, fingering well-worn, pale green plastic beads with the observation that the nuns recite the whole cycle each day in remembrance of the mysteries of Christ’s life and the salvation of humanity. Yet the affective, emotional, and for that matter spiritual significance of such forms and formalities remained more elusive to me.

In a way, then, it was reassuring to discover that the sisters didn’t really expect their methods of prayer to be self-evident to outsiders. It wasn’t really just a simple matter of silently addressing God inside one’s mind, my informants explained. Rather, prayer, for the Missionary Benedictines, represents a rather philosophically and psychologically complicated practice. For one thing, it is important to make time to quiet oneself beforehand. Sister Josephine told me that she generally tried to make it to the priory chapel by 5:30 or 6:00 in order to have at least half an hour to calm herself before the 6:30 evening prayer, for instance. Then there is the *lectio divina*, which, according to Sister Micha, entails choosing passages from either the Bible or another spir-

itually inspiring book (“but the Bible is best”) and ruminating on the words, chewing on them, repeating them to oneself, perusing them over and over, or whatever else one needs to do “to get the essence.” Nor is the “how to” of the *lectio divina* obvious. As Sister Josephine explained,

When you have *lectio divina*, you don’t read. You let the word of God speak to you. You read it more attentively, and when you get a phrase or a word or a sentence that is very striking to you, that really touches you, then you just drown in it. It speaks to you, you know. Even maybe the scene will come vivid—whatever it is that is the gift of the Spirit.

Ideally, the *lectio* leads to *oratio*, too, which in turn, she continued, leads to *meditatio* and then *contemplatio*—at which point “no words are needed” and one “becomes one with God.” The nuns freely admit that the entire process doesn’t always occur all at once, however. The stages are really more a means of theoretically describing and directing what happens, or what should happen, than an accurate reflection of every prayer ever uttered by the sisters. Often, in fact, one only gets part of the way; Sister Micha joked that it had been easy for her to achieve religious ecstasy while in formation: “X to zzzzzz,” and she’d end up asleep. But Sister Josephine assured me it was important to recognize that, even when it seems as if nothing is happening, the spirit is at work. One just has to let go of everything, empty oneself, and let God be, a lesson she herself had learned reading the Scripture at night when she had insomnia. While Sister Micha could mock her own tendencies to drowse during prayer, Sister Josephine used to worry that her prayers would be lost. It had taken an understanding superior to reassure her that she was with the Lord even in her sleep.

Of course, if the *lectio divina* sometimes functions as a sedative, the final outcome is supposed to be action—*contemplatio* should ultimately lead not to otherworldly transcendence but to *actio*. As indicated in my previous discussion of the reformation of formation, my informants were quick to emphasize that their work in the world represents a means of paying tribute to God. Or, as the main informational brochure distributed by the congregation puts it, the sisters are not praying all the time “if by praying you imagine an around-the-clock recitation of lengthy litanies on bended knees, or communing with God, in silence and solitude. But we say, YES, we pray all the time because wherever we are, and whatever we do, we offer up the whole

day to the Lord—in prayer and in service.” In short, if being Missionary Benedictine requires balancing the injunction to *ora et labora*, it is important to understand that the two aren’t necessarily entirely distinct from one another; moreover, their definition is open to manipulation, effectively leaving room for participation in an arguably radical politics not only as work but also as the logical consequence of communion with God.

REFUELING

The sisters’ prayers serve another important function, too, “refueling” their resolve, as Sister Josephine put it. As indicated above, every Missionary Benedictine faces many and varied daily responsibilities, and their daily mandate to *ora* affords them an institutionally validated means of getting away for a while. When confronted by piles of paper or hordes of students or even an eager anthropologist, the nuns could quite legitimately say, come prayer time, “Excuse me, but I have to go to the chapel.” In fact, the priory reception desk is decorated with a prominent notice warning guests that, emergencies aside, the Missionary Benedictines are not available between noon and 2:30 P.M. during weekdays, or between noon and 3:00 P.M. on Sundays, the hours set aside for midday prayer and the Filipino siesta. Nor are they normally available between 5:30 and 6:30 in the morning, during which time they attend lauds and mass, between 6:00 and 6:30 in the evening, when they pray vespers, or between 8:00 and 8:30 at night, the period set aside for compline. So, prayer isn’t just a spiritual thing—it is also time during which the sisters don’t have to worry about being disturbed by outside requests or demands. It is time off for reflection and introspection or simply catching one’s breath while preparing for and/or reviewing the day.¹⁷

The sisters’ prayer sessions provided not only time out, though, but also space out, so to speak. Going to prayer afforded the nuns a break not only from their day’s work but also from their surroundings. After all, the noise from the streets was conspicuous at the main priory and college houses in Manila; indeed, Sister Josephine regularly complained to me about it, with her haggard looks to prove the destructive effect it was having on her health. Every night, she said, she was kept awake by the buses and cars traversing the four roads surrounding St. Scholastica’s. Jeepney horns could be heard all day, too, their *draybers* darting across traffic to pick up prospective passengers—somehow expertly

dodging the balut vendors lounging behind their carts in hopes of hungry customers, and avoiding the little children peddling chiclets, cigarettes, and sampaguita garlands at the windows of private vehicles.¹⁸ Then, the sidewalks were crowded with uniformed (and happily chattering) students in quest of that popular American delicacy, french fries, or Magnolia ice cream in several exotic flavors, or, on the more studious side, copying services at only twenty-five centabos per page—if one didn't mind faded ink. Nor could one ignore the harried businesspeople at the *sari-sari* store phones, attempting to get their suppliers on line because this or that delivery was late and there was another brown-out last night and last week's typhoon left a leak in the roof.

Admittedly, the convent was separated from much of this outside commotion by formidable borders—high walls enclosing the priory grounds, heavy metal gates locked by armed men every night, clearance procedures required of every prospective visitor. Only nuns, lecturers, pupils in proper garb, and guests with good cause were allowed in: admittance was denied the beggars sporadically hassling passers-by outside, the *traysiklists* lining up on the surrounding streets, and the vendors selling coconuts, green mango, and newspapers to SSC's elite clientele. Yet while well policed and materially obvious, the walls surrounding SSC's grounds served to contain the nuns' lives only in a minimal physical sense—the sounds and smells of the external world, much less the schoolday students, couldn't be effectively kept out.

On the other hand, notwithstanding the chaos filtering over into the general convent grounds, the chapel itself somehow gave an impression of silence. Indeed, the church could be an eerily peaceful place, perhaps partly because so large in comparison to the more closely contained concrete rooms of even middle-class houses in Manila. Its relatively quiet, cool, and uncluttered interior, with orderly pews and far-flung ceilings, created a sense of extraordinary sanctity. Here, our conversations were all hush-hush, our steps as light as we could make them. The sisters' mandated moments of prayer here were no small thing, then, in the midst of their busy and cluttered lives. In the chapel, they could momentarily gain real physical distance from the worries weighing on them, both for purposes of personal psychological health, and precisely in order to more effectively apply their Missionary Benedictine values to their everyday concerns.

Of course, the sisters' cloistered cells, off-limits to all but the professed, also provided space out. Not even the Missionary Benedictine novices were allowed in the clausura, as I discovered one day when Mona took me on a roundabout route from the priory to the grade

school in search of costumes for the entrants' upcoming St. Benedict's celebration—carefully asking where we could and could not walk. And even self-identified extrovert Sister Josephine said she very much valued the privacy afforded by the cloister. She spent much of her time working in her cell rather than more communal settings: in her own cell, she could remove her habit and veil and put on music of her choice.

Nor, is such privacy something to be taken for granted within the Philippine context. Although the cells weren't luxury suites, the maintenance of separate individual spaces, however small, is a rather rare thing in Manila. Unless very wealthy, most Manileños share their living and sleeping quarters with others. I lived across the street from a typically large household, for instance, in which parents, grandparents, a brother and his wife, three children, several cousins, and three live-in domestic helpers somehow managed to distribute themselves among only four bedrooms, two a mere five by ten feet in size. And this was a middle-class family by Philippine standards. The Seths weren't by any means impoverished, either, but Arjun and Raja had to share a bedroom, while the family's two domestic helpers were crowded into what appeared to me little more than a closet. Tita Em's children shared space with their nanny, too, while yet another of my lay informants shared one room with her entire family in a house owned by her husband's brother. In short, privacy is neither very practical nor necessarily very highly valued within even middle-class Metro Manila.

In the convent setting, though, having somewhere to go if irritated by one's companions or if desirous of concentrating on relatively private and focused activities such as grading or private counseling facilitates the sustainability of a communal lifestyle. Although the nuns were generally on their best behavior in my presence, my informants admitted that convent life is marked by the same sorts of interpersonal tensions and disagreements typical of lay life. Sister Josephine observed, for instance, that some of the Missionary Benedictines were "really like sisters—not just friends but like blood sisters in terms of concern, in terms of how we relate. More or less we have shared so much of who we are with each other." On the other hand, she didn't "click" very well with others of the congregation, and sharing household space with them could at times, "become a real rub, you know. It's not easy." Not everyone always gets along, and the cells provide an important introspective arena within which private issues can be resolved and high emotions dissipated without disrupting the entire congregation, rendering eventual reconciliation and friendly participation in collective activities all the more possible in the event of conflict.

Reclaiming Philippine Faith as Feminist Practice

Notwithstanding the routine of the sisters' everyday, of course, their lives are also punctuated by new and sometimes unexpectedly illuminating opportunities and experiences afforded them precisely as Missionary Benedictines. Indeed, not only the fact of the sisters' religious flexibility but also some of the ways in which their understandings of spirituality support an activist politics were exemplified by what proved a very instructive pilgrimage I made with Sister Micha to Mount Banahaw, a sacred mountain in the Philippines. Notably, the journey not only entailed geographical movement across space to the mountain but also engaged us in movement across cultures, and, symbolically, in movement across time, both backward through Philippine history and forward to a projected millennium. Moreover, as a pilgrimage across such multiple boundaries, the trip helped to cue me in to a larger, always religious, and often appropriative Missionary Benedictine search for both national and feminist relevance.

Not, of course, that I understood the excursion in such highly theorized fashion at the time. Rather, I was simply excited at the prospect of an overnighter with Sister Micha that warm January Saturday. Officially, the sister volunteered to make the trip as chaperone to the Love Bank, a club composed of St. Scholasticans and medical-school students interested in mission work. The medical students would offer the residents of Mount Banahaw free checkups and minor medical services, while the collegians would distribute free medicine, obtained by soliciting pharmaceutical companies. And as dean of student affairs, the sister was happy to help; after all, she wanted to encourage the students to get involved with underprivileged populations in the Philippines. Nor would their contributions be unappreciated. Banahaw residents have limited access to Manilaño supplies and services in the normal course of affairs. Traveling the distance between the mountain and the

metropolis by public transportation normally entails making several stops and taking a chance on often irregular and unreliable jeepneys; we ourselves were lucky to have the private bus commissioned by St. Scholastica's, not to mention the sleeping quarters afforded by our college connections.

If Sister Micha was formally accompanying the Love Bank as an SSC official, however, she had her own reasons for making the trip, too. The outing represented a rare opportunity not only to see the fabled mountain but also to visit the Siyudad Mistika, a nationalist religious cult headquartered at Banahaw.¹ Nor is the Siyudad alone. There are many millennial and nationalist sects based in the area—some eighty in all, including splinter groups (although Quibuyen's [1991] estimate of thirty is more conservative) according to Carmen—then celebrating her twentieth year as a teacher of both religion and women's studies at SSC. The various groups coexist peacefully, even observing one another's celebration days and often joining together for communal purposes.

The Siyudad Mistika is the largest of this multitude; moreover, it is of particular interest in this case because headed by Suprema, a sort of symbolic model of Philippine female religious empowerment for many of the nuns. Not all the sisters personally know the high priestess: many simply know of her from congregation stories of both the priestess and her following, not to mention the traditional pilgrimage cycle made by devotees. Nevertheless, all of the nuns with whom I talked about the sect expressed fascination with Suprema and the Siyudad Mistika alike—this they told me, was a religion run by women, testifying to indigenous Filipina spiritual expertise. And that, in turn, is why “exposures” to Mount Banahaw have been incorporated into the Trainor's Training (*sic*) offered both lay and religious Filipina activists by the IWS as a sort of introduction to gender issues.

The expert of the moment was neither Sister Micha nor any of the other nuns, however, but Carmen. Although not Missionary Benedictine herself, she was heavily involved with both the sisters and the IWS; in fact, she regularly participated in women's ritual sessions with the nuns, was instrumental in the development and implementation of the women's studies program at SSC, was highly knowledgeable about Philippine feminism in general, and was altogether as much an activist as an academic. What's more, she clearly got along very well with Sister Micha, which was doubtless partly why she decided to accompany us to Mount Banahaw as a very welcome guide and trail veteran.²

Nor was Carmen the only one to join what, in the end, proved a

rather eclectic band of travelers. When I arrived at the college with my backpack in hand, I was both surprised and pleased to be introduced to two more aspiring pilgrims—a German student named Gretta and a Korean feminist theologian named Mei. I had actually already heard of Gretta when one of my more casual informants confused us upon my initial arrival in the Philippines. While such confusion was certainly understandable given the fact that we both had white skin, blue eyes, and fair hair, however, Gretta was in the country for somewhat different reasons than I. As we waited for the decidedly tardy medical students to board the bus hired for the excursion, she told me she was completing a research practicum with children in the urban squatter communities of Metro Manila for a German social work program—an enjoyable venture but also a difficult one, she admitted, because, ignorant of Tagalog, she had to rely on sign language and play.

APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE APPROPRIATION

Mei, on the other hand, although also foreign, and certainly also ignorant of Tagalog, configured her much more short-term presence in the Philippines not in terms of difference but rather in terms of a common “Asianness.” If both Gretta and the Indian and Chinese women I met on the convent grounds talked to me of various difficulties in managing the Philippines as outsiders, Mei was not prepared to admit to any such problems. Instead, she was rather appropriative of Asian cultural diversity. After identifying herself as a Korean theologian here for five days to work on a book with Carmen, she rather casually informed us that she would make her next stop in India. And, “Oh,” she went on, she “loved India;” she “must have been Indian in a previous incarnation.” Her stomach, she thought, was Buddhist, her heart was Christian, half her brain was Taoist, and the other half of her brain was Confucian.

“Confusion—yes, that’s right!” concluded Sister Micha at the end of the monologue—unable to resist a joke, this time prompted by and pointed at Mei’s seeming appropriative pretensions. While I thought I detected irritation at Mei’s claims to be a corporeal representation of everything Asian here, though, Mei herself was not entirely different from Sister Micha in identifying across the diversity of Asian traditions. In many ways, the Missionary Benedictines are themselves appropriative of cultural alternatives, including those represented by the *Siyudad Mistika*. Moreover, the Philippine congregation prides itself in being a

“new Asian missionary center” as part of the “only Christian nation in Asia.” Such congregational claims are hardly any more legitimate than Mei’s talk of being Buddhist-Christian-Taoist-Confucian: just as Mei was emphasizing her Asianness over her Koreanness in order to forward her collaboration with the Filipinas hosting her, the Missionary Benedictines are emphasizing their Asianness over their Philippineness in order to forward the establishment of new houses in India and China.

All of this bears on the sisters’ understandings of their Philippineness, too. Nationality and internationalism were of simultaneous and inseparable concern to my interviewees, who, again, existed within an arguably privileged yet troublesomely ambiguous liminal space between and across more traditional lines of self-definition. Just as gender was of issue to the sisters precisely because of the ways in which they were transgressing cultural gender expectations, being (and proving themselves) Filipina was of issue to them precisely because of their vulnerability to accusations of insufficient patriotism—of having capitulated to Western hegemonies because identified with an originally German congregation or, more critically, because feminist. Although, for the sisters themselves, being Missionary Benedictine and being feminist afforded opportunities to transcend the very bounds of citizenship and geography, such crossings-over were apt to engender different but equally uncomfortable sorts of suspicions in the Philippine left and the Philippine mainstream alike.

At the moment, then, the fact that we were on our way to a Philippine nationalist stronghold mattered. Being Philippine would and did make a difference here for some of the reasons suggested above; this, I think, was why Sister Micha—who had ironically proven herself impatient with the Chinese candidates’ failure to fit in—appeared so perturbed at Mei’s claims to familiarity, and even identity, across all of Asia. After all, the sister had little investment in Filipinizing Mei. Mei’s presence was quite obviously casual, and her attitude simultaneously culturally arrogant en route to what might be read as an encounter with the face of the Philippines itself. It wasn’t so much that Mei was a foreigner, like Gretta and me, but that she appeared ready to appropriate the *Siyudad* in support of her own self-definition, something Sister Micha clearly felt she had more right to do herself as a Filipina.

MORE MONKEY BUSINESS

Of course, the fact that the *Siyudad Mistika* was serious business for Sister Micha didn’t stop her from joking—as should be evident by now,

she often joked about serious things. In part, admittedly, this was quite simply because she was Filipino, and Filipinos stereotypically place a high value on performance and entertainment. Indeed, the 1994–95 *Primer on the Philippines* put out by the Philippine Convention and Visitors Corporation advertises “Sixty-million smiling Filipinos [who] account for the sense of fun and openness in the archipelago.” More generally, Filipinos often present themselves as ever ready to laugh, sing, dance, and party, even in the midst of poverty and disaster, all of which points to the widespread cultural value placed on the appearance of being carefree and lighthearted. Appearances (and national self-stereotypes) can be deceiving, however. In contexts where openly expressing hostility is extremely impolite, humor can quite intentionally be employed to express controversial opinions or even downright disagreement without explicitly offending anyone, as Sister Micha herself well knew.

Consider some of the sister’s jokes, for instance. Having already manipulated the homophones *Confucian* and *confusion* to both get a laugh and forward a subtle critique of Mei’s appropriative tendencies, the sister went on with what was essentially a form of wordplay—not to mention a commentary on the possibilities of miscommunication. While watching Gretta unwrap a chicken sandwich packed by the house help at Subiaco, Sister Micha took it upon herself to describe a comic strip she liked. The first character, she told us, says, “My tummy doesn’t feel too good.” The second responds, “It feels fine to me” while putting his hand on the first character’s stomach. So the first lifts his club over the other’s head, shouting, “Your head won’t feel too good soon.”

Notably, such joking—dependent on double meanings and terminological twists—was typical of the sister. Recall her talk of the nuns’ *ung-goy* formation, for instance, or of going from “X to zzzzz” in prayer. During one of our lunch dates at Chow King, a Chinese-Filipino fast-food restaurant, too, she entertained me with a set of stories already familiar to me from my childhood in the United States: a customer finds a fly in her soup and asks what it’s doing there: “Looks like the backstroke,” says the waiter, or, “Did you want a mosquito instead?” In all of these cases, the sister’s humor turns on specifically linguistic ambiguities—what does it mean to say a tummy doesn’t feel good or to announce a fly in one’s soup? If the jokes are funny, they are funny because the mistakes or confusion involved are both in some sense obvious and simultaneously perfectly reasonable errors of communication. Indeed, listening to and “getting” such jokes depends on, and in fact serves as proof or

reassurance of, knowledge of the way language works—knowledge, in short, both of what was really meant and of why the mistakes made might be made, whether with the suggestion of intention or due to simple misinterpretation. In many ways, then, as joker, Sister Micha herself was displaying and practicing linguistic facility.

Moreover, the above examples all involve the English language. And this, I would argue is significant not only given the history of the Philippines and the internationalization of the congregation but also the fact that I, the ethnographer and Sister Micha's interviewer, was myself a native American English speaker. In short, I suspect the sister's reliance on English in joking with me (and, in the case of the tummy joke, with a larger international audience) bears significance over and above her desire to entertain. Admittedly, in part, her choice may have been practical; after all, the alternative, Filipino, was no more her own first language than was English. Indeed, although the proponents of Filipino intend it to be and promote it as a pan-Philippine language, it is actually highly contested in the Philippines because largely based on Tagalog, and Sister Micha not only came from Iloilo, in the Visayas, but also admitted to me that many Tagalog-speaking Manileños thought her accent funny. Her English, on the other hand, was well practiced, if Filipinized—English not only having been taught her in elementary school, but also serving as the generic scholastic, bureaucratic, and global, language of the congregation.

Speaking to me in English was not just pragmatic or even hospitable, however. As mentioned previously, English is a high-status language in the Philippines, largely because it signifies high-status Americanness (in turn historically associated with power and privilege in the republic) and indexes the ability to participate on at least equal linguistic terms in international exchange. Thus, Filipino tourist pamphlets proudly trumpet the notion that the Philippines is an “English-speaking country.” More generally, many Filipinos, including those in government, see their knowledge of English as capital in the global market. The apparent success of Filipino overseas workers (OCWs) is often at least partly attributed to their knowledge of English—Filipinas are said to have an edge on other Third World nannies, for instance, because better able to communicate with their employers and charges alike.³ In addition, the Philippine government and local big business are attempting to attract foreign development by, in part, advertising the linguistic facility of Filipino laborers. Although many of the people employed in the EPZs are not in fact well educated in English due to a

lack of school resources and proficient teachers in many rural and impoverished parts of the archipelago, this only supports the point that English speaking ability has something to do with economics here; it is the elite of the Philippines who can afford an English education in the country's elite schools, thereby further extending the possibilities of exchange with and access to the West. Sister Micha's linguistic choices, then, may represent attempts to demonstrate both her personal merit and the internationalism of her congregation, thereby proving her quality as an informant, however much I myself was desirous of practicing my Filipino with the nuns.

The sister's wordplay may have provided a means of asserting equality with me, too. After all, she had a stake in getting me to take her seriously. And, ironically, demonstrating her English facility may have represented a way to persuade me that she knew what she was talking about. What's more, joking this way may have rendered the interviews less anxiety provoking—we could have fun, we could be friends, and she could take control of our sessions enough to make me laugh. Such humor doubtless also served as a test of sorts. Several months into my fieldwork, Sister Micha confessed that she “liked people who laughed at her jokes.” Trying her jokes out on me, therefore, may have afforded her a way of ascertaining whether I was someone she might like and someone who would not only “get” the jokes but also “get,” and thus more accurately represent, her.

Indeed, the fact that many of her jokes had to do with ways in which language can be misinterpreted and misused might be taken as an expression of some concern over my interpretative authority as an ethnographer. The sister's wordplay hinged on the highly inexact, and therefore highly manipulable, nature of language in general and, in particular, the English language within the Philippines. As indicated previously, language has long been used as a colonial tool in the archipelago; consider not only the early Spanish confessionals and Latin masses, but also the ways in which the Americans schooled and ruled the country in English. Notably, such forms of linguistic imperialism have significantly disadvantaged Filipinos during highly charged political negotiations dependent, in part, on linguistic facility. On the other hand, Filipinos have also long employed wordplay to make political points; Iletto (1979), for instance, discusses the use of *wika-wika* (wordplay) within the context of Philippine nationalist efforts in the late nineteenth century. Although the tummy joke does not explicitly involve characters of any specific nationality, then, the sort of misinter-

pretation indexed by the second's response to the first's talk of "not feeling good" might be understood as pointedly metaphorical of the ways in which Filipinos have either been intentionally or simply carelessly misunderstood by foreign powers.

Others of the sister's jokes even more directly indexed concern over the negotiation of foreign matter in the Philippine context, however. For instance, during our very first interview, Sister Micha asked if I had heard of the car Pajero? The Filipinos, she said, had decided to build one just like it; they had called it "Pareho"—or "the same." How about the Mercedes Benz? Here, in the Philippines, a virtually identical model was called "Mercedes Din," *din* meaning "also." The subtext here, of course, is the point that Filipinos are (or at least popularly conceive of themselves as) good imitators; if they see something they like and can't get it or afford it themselves, they simply copy it. Nor are such claims to imitative prowess insignificant with respect to the ambiguous position of the Philippines vis-à-vis the international market. Again, Western businesses both operating factories in and selling "high-status" goods in the Philippines have drawn the republic into the global marketplace, with the production of a broad reaching and socially important desire for things western. Yet, here was the suggestion of the possibility of subverting such desire through the appropriation of those very objects desired. If Filipinos have been induced to want Pajeros, well, they will make their own—pareho—thereby manipulating and rewriting the complicated and unequal relationship existing between the Philippines and the rest of the world. The West may have reorganized the world economy to the detriment of Filipinos, but Filipinos can themselves exploit both foreign language and foreign cultural materials in defiance of capitalistic Western interests.

Notably, both the heavy reliance of the Philippines on things foreign and, ultimately, the importance of Filipino agency were also implicated in yet another of the sister's stories—this time concerning a theological argument between a Japanese man and a Filipino man. "Buddha is the greatest," says the former, while the latter insists God is much superior. "No, Buddha!" "No, God." And so forth, until at last they decide to put the matter to a test atop a high mountain cliffside, with the agreement that whoever has the fewest broken bones after jumping over the edge will be proven correct. The Japanese man leaps off first, chanting "Buddha, Buddha, Buddha" all the way down—until, right before crashing into the ground, he miraculously begins levitating all the way back up. So, the Filipino jumps, reciting "God, God, God" while falling. "God,

God, God,” Sister Micha continued—and, right at the point where the Japanese began levitating—“God, God . . . Buddha!” Which means, of course, that he is saved.

While the joke again pokes fun at Filipino deference to the value of foreign traditions, of course, it additionally forwards an implicit claim to the right and ability of Filipinos to make use of such alien cultural forms. And why not? While copying carries negative connotations in America, the ability to imitate and appropriate and to change strategies given situational demands has been of significant survival value in the Philippines, not only given the nation’s long colonialist subjugation to a wide variety of different, foreign cultural pressures but also given modern globalization, rendering the capacity to adjust relatively easily or to conform to divergent social demands very useful. Indeed, the ease with which the Missionary Benedictines accommodate (and make their own use of) foreignness has doubtless not only contributed to their own self-proclaimed missionary success across the globe but also signifies, to both self and other, their Philippineness. Likewise, the nuns’ simultaneous self-presentation as both Westernized and Asian, both Catholic and pagan, and both global and Filipino is quite simply good strategy, amplifying their options in diverse situational contexts and significantly underscoring a fluidity of faith backgrounding their very interest in the *Siyudad Mistika*.

A RADICAL NATIONALISM

The *Siyudad* itself represents not just a religious sect of sorts, however, but also a highly nationalistic political collective.⁴ Cult members identify with past Filipino resistance efforts against the Spanish, the Japanese, and the Americans. Moreover, although founded by Maria Bernarda Balitaan as recently as the late 1950s, the *Siyudad* can be understood as a part of a long tradition of local reformatory and nationalistic religious movements, “a tradition of resistance to the prevailing power structure in Philippine society and an alternative vision of the moral order” (Quibuyen 1992, 20–21; also see Cullamar 1986; Iletto 1979; Marasigan 1985; and Schumacher 1979, 1981). During the early 1800s, Apolinario de la Cruz established a rebel millenarian fraternity titled the *Cofradia de San Jose*, the members of which not only made regular pilgrimages to Banahaw, but also hid out in the tunnels honeycombing the mountain in an attempt to evade Spanish attempts to violently suppress their revolutionary efforts (Iletto 1979; Quibuyen

1991). Cult activity flourished in the area in the late 1800s, too. “By the time the revolution against Spain began in 1896, the cult was an established center for the Lenten pilgrimage, attracting not only Tagalogs but people from all over the archipelago” (Ileto 1979, 68). In fact, Sebastian Caneo, a pastor heavily involved with the Philippine independence movement, claimed to have heard *santong boces* (holy voices) in Banahaw’s caves directing the rebels to march on the Spanish with magical rope. Likewise, in 1935, Agapito Illustrisimo heard supernatural voices on the mountain, this time calling for the formation of the *Tres Personas Solo Dios*—another local religio-nationalist sect still in existence today (Marasigan 1985; Quibuyen 1991).

Nor is the *Siyudad* any less nationalistic; in fact the group’s patriotism is inscribed on its church. For one thing, the main window to the far end of the chapel was fashioned out of three panels of different hues, one red, one white (or transparent, to be exact), and one blue. These, Mr. Santos—our *Siyudad* host—explained, represented the Filipino flag, consisting of a white triangle containing a yellow sun, bordered by a blue tail on top and a red one below. The flag had been banned during part of the American “occupation,” he continued, but who was to say its colors couldn’t be painted on glass?⁵

The otherwise spartan interior of the church was also decorated with several brightly illustrated posters glorifying José Rizal—again, widely considered the most important national hero of the Philippines and credited for having roused the masses and angered the Spanish through his novels. An oversized portait of the revolutionary with his incendiary *Noli Me Tangere* and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo*, adorned one wall of the church, next to a bold depiction of Rizal lifted half off the ground by the force of the bullet that took his life—much to the apparent amusement of two Spaniards rendered here in striking and, I suspect, bitter detail. If Rizal’s martyrdom was meant to be metaphoric of the larger experience of colonization, however, it was likewise intended to recall Christ’s own public martyrdom, and the scene was bordered by representations of twelve other Filipino national heroes—Rizal’s disciples, by *Siyudad* logic. After all, for the cultists, Rizal is a superhuman son of God just like Jesus, and his biography has been mapped onto Christ’s in an ironic appropriation of the terms of the Catholic conquerors.⁶

Of course, unlike Jesus, Rizal has national relevance to the sect. Worshipping the Philippine hero represents another inversion of the terms of Catholicism; the use of Biblical models here signifies not the internalization of Christian pacifism, but, rather, the recognition of a revolu-

tionary politics in Christianity justifying struggles against imperialism. After all, while Christianity may be interpreted as a passive creed, it can also clearly be understood as an exhortation to adhere to personal convictions despite persecution (Ileto 1979). It isn't so much Jesus's exhortations to universal love, patience, and forgiveness that interest the Siyudad, then, but his trials and tribulations, his rebellious defiance of Roman authority, and his sympathy for the underprivileged. What's more, from the Siyudad perspective, herein lies both a scriptural mandate to nationalist action and a rationale for Rizal's promotion to superhuman status. No matter that Rizal himself was critical of religion, and no matter that Christ himself was arguably more an internationalist than a patriot; the cult's simultaneous and selective reverence for both support and legitimate the continuing belief that it is necessary, as a mission of faith, to struggle against the "two forces [that] have enslaved [the Philippines]: sin and other countries" (Quibuyen 1991, 16).

RECONFIGURING MAINSTREAM PHILIPPINE VALUES

Indeed, while much of its mythology is premised on both the legendary and historical past, the Siyudad remains suspicious of foreign interference in the modern day Philippines, too. More specifically, cultists maintain interconnected concerns with both the reclamation of a Filipino morality believed adulterated by the West and the rectification of social inequalities attributed, at least in part, to the colonial and neo-colonial history of the nation. From the Siyudad perspective, America's political interest in the Philippines, the exploitative use of local labor in foreign-owned EPZs, and the purported perversion of Filipino youth through the production of excessive material desire and the promotion of sexual laxity all exemplify objectionable forms of relationship between the republic and the West. Siyudad members further blame westernization for the corruption of the Philippine elite who, as a general class, are benefiting from and making use of foreign goods, educational opportunities, and connections—in oblivion to, or sometimes even at the expense of, the Philippine poor. In contrast, local responsibility, frugality, and economic cooperation are emphasized within the Siyudad:

Money symbolizes the ungodly qualities of greed and selfishness. Though the priestesses provide the collective labor in a commu-

nal economic enterprise involving the raising of orchids and other ornamental plants which are sold in the city and also the manufacture of children's clothes for export, there is no capital accumulation. Profit is used for the sustenance of the whole CMD community. (Quibuyen 1991, 15)

In short, the community appears more socialist than capitalist in its organization and operation, with the religious as involved as anyone else in insuring the town's sustainability.⁷ And, in these respects, the Siyudad represents a counterhegemonic response to both the global orientation and entrenched class inequalities typical of Manilaño and more mainstream Filipino society.

Nor should the Siyudad's counterhegemonic stance be surprising, although initially seemingly at odds with scholarly convention concerning the analysis of traditional Philippine social structure. Most students of lowland Philippine culture have focused on the patron-client relationship as the primary organizing principle in Philippine society. Such relationships historically existed between lowland Filipino peasants, farmers, and workers and their local elite benefactors, landlords, and employers—premised, in part, on *utang na loob*, translating into political loyalty and labor exchanged for economic assistance from the wealthy. Patron-client loyalties still can and do often cut across class interests in modern-day Manila; indeed, familial patron-client loyalties continue to play a significant role in Philippine elections and help to explain why even much-maligned figures like Imelda Marcos have returned to national power. Yet the patron-client model does not seem particularly helpful in explaining the periodic resurgence of peasant solidarity in religious rebellion throughout Philippine history. Rather, Iletto (1979) suggests that popular movements of this sort have tended to disrupt prevailing systems of class organization. And while Iletto's work is not specifically concerned with the Siyudad Mistika, this reading seems appropriate with respect to the cult, with allowances for the participation of select elite and for the ways in which Suprema herself may figure as a patron of sorts for some cult members.

We might understand the activities of the Siyudad Mistika, then, as an attempt to creatively formulate alternatives to mainstream Philippine society given an extensive critique of that society. Indeed, herein doubtless lies the cult's attraction for many of its members. Like many of its forerunners, the Siyudad has specific appeal to, and is largely comprised of, the disenfranchised; it is primarily a movement of the poor and underprivileged, a movement rendered sensible precisely

because of experienced suffering and inequity begging correction and resolution. Most members come to the faith in refuge from rural or urban poverty; moreover, most are dependent on the local elite and foreign markets alike for survival. We passed residents laying out coffee beans of several different shades to dry in preparation for export; many locals also work as day laborers in coconut plantations maintained by an upper class of Philippine landowners (Quibuyen 1991).

Thus, Siyudad objections to the unequal division of wealth in the Philippines and abroad reflect the cultists' own experiences of exploitation.⁸ If the townspeople rely on the land for their living, this doesn't mean they are self-sufficient. In fact, the Siyudad's resistance to capitalism and globalization has clearly been developed and is clearly maintained in a somewhat uneasy relationship with the community's doubtless much resented but obvious reliance on larger national and international economies. No grateful clients here, the locals instead subscribe to a faith significantly challenging the terms of their own institutionalized poverty.

After all, the Siyudad downplays such problematic worldly dependency by defining itself first and foremost as a New Jerusalem, its spirituality and geography signifying self-determination. Members can rest assured that the very global economy on which they currently rely will eventually collapse: the rest of the world will thereupon become dependent on them and their hospitality, their guardianship itself guaranteed partly by the material simplicity they, like the sisters, have reconfigured as a sign of moral purity. If scarcity has been imposed on the Siyudad's members, they have turned their need into virtue—much the way the Missionary Benedictines applaud poverty, if more by choice than by necessity.

SISTERLY INTEREST IN THE SIYUDAD

Siyudad values clearly parallel those of the nuns in other respects, too: the sisters not only devalue the accumulation of goods but also share resources and expressly oppose Western domination. In addition, like the Siyudad, the Missionary Benedictines—themselves internally hierarchical but democratically rather than absolutely so—represent a primary community premised on ideology, in opposition to traditional patron-client relations, not to mention the pursuit of conventional Philippine signs of status and power. Moreover, like cult members, the nuns prioritize hospitality and are engaged in utopian reform efforts.

And both communities are not only in some sense oriented toward the Bible as inspiration but also exist in a world in which economic and political inequalities abound and in which developing and maintaining a Philippine identity and Philippine independence is of increasing importance given the ambiguous ground of national solidarity and widespread cultural interest in acquiring and imitating foreign goods and signifiers. Both groups also evidence dissatisfaction with the ways in which women and men are differently conceptualized and valued within the country, and, as will presently be discussed in greater depth, both perceive connections between such problematic gender norms and the colonial/neocolonial history of the archipelago while imagining a more egalitarian future wherein the Philippine populace and Filipinas in particular are simultaneously liberated and empowered.

Nor, for that matter, are the two groups' forms of worship entirely different. In fact, the Siyudad church services we witnessed had an oddly familiar flavor. As we stood in front of the shrine the morning after our arrival, several members of the community entered the church and quietly seated themselves on mats set out before the shrine, reminiscent of the Missionary Benedictines awaiting lauds or compline. Worship here was as strictly scheduled as in the convent, too, although on a different basis: every hour, twelve men and twelve women would come here to pray, the women to the left and the men to the right, all lay members of the Siyudad assigned an entire day's devotion at monthly intervals. Moreover, the believers presented a rather uniform picture not altogether unlike that of the nuns at vespers. The women kneeling before the altar all wore white cloths over their heads and sported white blouses or T-shirts over white or blue skirts, while the men were all dressed in white tops and blue pants. And when one of them began chanting aloud from the Bible in Tagalog, so fast that not even Carmen and Sister Micha could understand the words, I couldn't help but think of the sisters' prayer sessions, wherein the act of ritualized speech itself often seemed of greater importance than the exact words. Despite important differences in detail, the similarities were striking: the formalized dress and positioning of persons, the ceremonial kneeling and rising, and the distinctive way in which biblical selections were given voice (marking their extraordinary character because verbalized in extraordinary fashion).

On the other hand, if the Missionary Benedictines and the Siyudad are both engaged in a counterdiscourse of sorts *vis-à-vis* the prevailing moral order, their social standings differ. Most obviously, perhaps, the sisters, however self-identified and involved as radical activists, enjoy

both the general social respect accorded the habit and the privileges of their congregation. Siyudad members, in contrast, not only have fewer actual resources to draw upon, but are also widely marginalized; notwithstanding Sister Micha's attempts to persuade them otherwise, even the well-intentioned Love Bankers and medical students we accompanied to Mount Banahaw proclaimed the cultists "loopy."

Yet while Suprema's participation in the development of a close relationship with the Missionary Benedictines may represent a strategic move on her part to gain greater public legitimacy, not to mention access to services of the sort provided by the Love Bank, the Missionary Benedictines in turn clearly have their own interest in maintaining a close connection with the cult. In part, the sisters obviously view Banahaw as a prime educational opportunity for both their own number and others—going on pilgrimage to the mountain provides a chance both to learn about (reconstructed) Philippine revolutionary history in an experiential rather than purely academic fashion and to witness female spiritual expertise.

Perhaps more significantly, however, the Siyudad offers the nuns validation of the sort they need—not with respect to the mainstream Philippine populace but with respect to the Philippine Left. After all, while the cult boasts historical connections to well-known Philippine revolutionaries, the Missionary Benedictines are in a rather more ambiguous position. As members of an international faith and an international congregation historically linked to the religious colonization of the country, albeit one more specifically established on Philippine soil within the neocolonial context of the American regime, the sisters stand vulnerable to accusations of national betrayal. Does their primary allegiance belong to the Philippines or to Germany or Rome? How can they term themselves "nationalist" if so global in orientation and experience?

Given such concerns, the nuns' interest in the Siyudad and participation in the pilgrimage cycles may well index a bid to prove their Philippineness. Although the cult might in fact be better understood as an example of post-Christian syncretism than as a modern-day revival of pre-Hispanic *babaylanism*, Siyudad members claim continuity with such pre-Hispanic practices. The Missionary Benedictines' connections with Suprema, then, effectively bolster their own claims to legitimacy as both indigenous religious practitioners and Philippine nationalists. Indeed, the nuns' association with the Siyudad is particularly important given the general value placed on origin stories within the modern Philippines—wherein assertions concerning Filipino identity often

involve reference to the pre-Hispanic (and thus presumably unadulterated or pure) Philippine past. While the congregation's German and Catholic origins may be suspect, the nuns' appropriation of the Siyudad's *babaylan* history provides a means of validation in such contexts (a point I will presently explore further with specific reference to the gendering of faith).

FAITH IN THE FUTURE

For now, however, we might return to a consideration of the Siyudad's millennialism. In fact, the cult exemplifies something of a classic revitalization effort to reconcile modern pressures (in this case, political and economic exploitation by both foreign nations and a Westernized Philippine elite) with indigenous values (local leadership, an ideal of communal self-sufficiency, and an animistic relationship with the local natural geography) (Wallace 1956; see also Cullamar 1986). Given Siyudad belief that God is not only good but also omniscient and omnipotent, it seems a forgone conclusion that, eventually, the unjustly (and, by Siyudad reckoning, highly virtuous) disempowered will gain back what is rightfully theirs, subject to final judgments based on moral right rather than social or worldly success (which, from the Siyudad perspective, signifies sinfulness in the first place). The millennialism of adherents, then, derives from their faith in not only the desirability but also the inevitability of some sort of ultimate resolution to present injustices—an ultimate resolution on earth in real time rather than merely in some faraway eternity. Local misfortune will be vindicated with the onset of a new age in the biography of humanity. Following the destruction of the world in its present form (already foreshadowed, in Siyudad eyes, by an increase in both natural and human-caused disasters worldwide), Mount Banahaw will attain its rightful place as something of a chosen land—a New Jerusalem—where the Siyudad, as a chosen people, will offer survivors both salvation and refuge from God's wrath. Indeed, devotees are constructing a big brick building in anticipation of the influx—a generous gesture, despite its probable future insufficiency given the numbers forecast by their millennial prophesying.

In fact, I couldn't quite see how the Siyudad intended to host an international overflow of saved sinners. After all, if Mr. Santos, our evidently well-off Manileño host, had room for guests, he was an anomaly here. While his sometime mountain residence was quite large and

comfortable, the rest of the town of Dolores amounted to little more than a scattering of small nipa huts and bare concrete constructions, hardly suitable for sustaining a surplus. On the other hand, the locals themselves didn't appear particularly bothered by the prospect of a huge population crunch, perhaps partly given their faith that God would take care of any practical problems, and perhaps partly because, as is, it was quite simply difficult to envision Mount Banahaw as anything other than refreshingly uncluttered. In the present premillennial day, the area remained of little interest to anyone other than hikers and mountain climbers: although the Missionary Benedictines came for the Siyudad, they were a rarity, Carmen assured me. Carmen was not eager to see an increase in outsider visits to the area, either; notwithstanding Siyudad interpretations of such visits as a sign of their growing significance, Carmen expressed concern that the mountain might become a mere tourist destination for Filipinos and foreigners with little real respect for the local faith. Indeed, even our own presence was suspect—didn't our very interest in the Siyudad turn in part on the ways in which we were imagining it as exotic and other?

Yet perhaps Suprema had her own reasons for so warmly welcoming us. Notwithstanding our foreignness, not to mention the fact that our interest fell short of conversion, our voyeurism was encouraged. Doubtless, this was in part due to genuine Siyudad goodwill and religious magnanimity and in part because maintaining connections with SSC made for good press and important services. On the other hand, our very interest doubtless also represented a sort of national victory within the arena of hospitality. From the Siyudad perspective, we were sinful, ignorant, and in need of salvation. What's more, in enlightening us our hosts could both gain symbolic currency in a society explicitly valuing hostessing as a mark of the good Filipino and incur *utang na loob*, thereby exerting subtle forms of influence over us. True, we might not in fact repay our hosts in any way beyond the offer of a hundred pesos per person for room and board, but we would remain in some sense symbolically indebted to them—or at least we should remain so, by their cultural standards.⁹

Of course, our visible—and alien—presence also offered Suprema the opportunity to reaffirm her position as high priestess. It was hardly surprising, then, to find ourselves invited to the cult leader's simultaneously residential and governmental quarters, housed in one of the larger buildings in town. Nor did we have to wait long for the Siyudad matriarch, although I would hardly have recognized her as such but for the respect obviously accorded her by her comrades. She was clothed

only in a simple blue-and-white batik housedress, and wore her gray hair pulled tightly back in a bun, rendering her angular features and beaked nose a bit severe. Despite her rather plain, if unforgiving, appearance, however, the smile she flashed Carmen in recognition was surprisingly and auspiciously generous. She greeted the rest of us with friendly pleasantries, too, as Carmen introduced the remainder of our party, taking care to underline our Missionary Benedictine connections. Sister Micha belonged to the same order as Sister Justine, while Gretta, Mei, and I were affiliates and friends of St. Scholastica's, the justification for our all too obviously foreign presence in a world in which affiliations and nationality meant everything.

And what, then, of Suprema herself? In response to our questions, she told us a bit more about both the Siyudad and herself, with Sister Micha and Carmen translating what was apparently a deeper Tagalog than that commonly used on the streets of Manila. The faith owed much of its existence, Suprema informed us, to seekers who came to Mount Banahaw upon hearing voices. Each time the voices manifested, a big bird appeared to guide the faithful through yet another part of the pilgrimage cycle until, eventually, all seven of the Siyudad sacred sites were revealed, in a reclamation of both indigenous religious expertise and the sanctity of the Philippine landscape itself.

The early seekers hardly had a monopoly on communion with the divine, however; Suprema herself also claimed to have heard voices, mandating not only her vocation but also the details of cult activity, including the aforementioned construction of new buildings for the millennium. Not, she admitted, that she had always held such visionary power. In fact, she hadn't even been born on Mt. Banahaw, but had instead been introduced to the cult by her father. Her father's status as a seeker pledged to regularly visit the mountain had not guaranteed her Siyudad membership, either: children, she explained, were only allowed into the church once old enough to make the decision for themselves. Still, given her prior contact with the cult and her family's eventual permanent relocation to the area, it was hardly surprising that she was eventually chosen by God herself—in this case not only as a priestess but also as the next community leader. It wasn't something she had planned on doing or had even particularly wanted to do, she assured us. It was just a matter of her calling, not unlike the calling of which many of my Missionary Benedictine informants spoke.

Suprema's powers weren't limited to the Siyudad context, either. She ultimately proved (or at least professed herself) something of a prophetess on a larger, if also more intimate, scale. Some of the priest-

esses in training interrupted Suprema's narrative to offer us a sumptuous lunch of soup, rice, and various fish, vegetable, chicken, and beef dishes. As we settled down to the feast before us, Mr. Santos observed to Sister Micha that, unlike Catholic nuns, Siyudad priestesses take no formal vows. The sister, in turn, quite reasonably asked why not. "Well," Mr. Santos explained, because vows "never go beyond the moment" and are thus "useless." "Useless?!" If Sister Micha was not easily shocked, this certainly took her aback, provoking the somewhat indignant response that her own vows were periodically renewed and that she found them helpful in keeping her "on track."

Indeed, while I could understand our host's desire to defend his own beliefs against the perceived threat of a Catholic nun affiliated with a more popular and higher-status form of Filipino religiosity—however accepting of difference herself—I found it curious that he would suggest her vows indexed a lack of sufficient inner spiritual strength. His critique involved a failure to recognize the ways in which he himself participated in spiritual exercises such as the pilgrimage in order to remind himself of and renew his faith. Moreover, notwithstanding his claim, Siyudad members do in fact make vows—just vows of a different sort, undertaken not in order to gain or retain cult membership but as situationally specific forms of worship. Recall, for instance Suprema's references to her own father's pledge. Cultists also engage in practices like bathing in the sacred mountain waters as "a form of *panata*, a ritual practice to thank God for prayers answered or to ask for special favors, not for oneself but on behalf of others—like a relative's recovery from a dreaded terminal disease or a friend's success in an examination" (Quibuyen 1991, 13–14).

Of course, perhaps this was precisely the point of contention. The term *panata* not only means "vow" or "promise to perform a certain religious devotion" but is also widely used to designate nuns' holy vows in the Philippines. On the other hand, Suprema had referenced the term herself earlier in the day. Outsiders, she observed, often viewed the cult with suspicion, sometimes even trying to convince her that she was wrong. For example, a Catholic guest had attempted to persuade her of the existence of hell. She had responded that she was indeed very interested in hell: could he take her there? He couldn't, of course—because, she asserted, perhaps as a warning to us, hell couldn't be proven. It was all a matter of faith, just like her own religion. But many people couldn't get past their blinders. Many, she admitted, still persisted in calling the Siyudad fanatics, or *panatika-ko*. These doubters didn't realize, however, that the term *panatika* was derived from the Filipino *panata*.¹⁰

So, Siyudad members had begun referring to themselves as *panatik*, indexing not the fanaticism outsiders perceive but their pilgrimage practices. In short, they had reclaimed the word as an expression of faith, turning it into an advantage, a positive thing. But the very fact that such a twist was necessary pointed to the motives doubtless prompting Mr. Santos's defensiveness. Both Suprema and Mr. Santos had clearly experienced prior ideological attacks on their faith: it was understandable, then, that both felt it imperative to demonstrate their legitimacy to us in order to avert any expression of skepticism on our part. More than that, though—if they were now identifying as *panatik*, it was necessary to defend the nature of their *panata* as something different from but, in Siyudad eyes, even more valid than the sort of *panata* Sister Micha had made (and the sort of *panata* with which most of their guests are probably more familiar). In other words, the rather surprising challenge our host posed to the sister might be seen as part and parcel of a larger preemptive claim to rights over the terms and practices by which the cult defined itself.

Not that any of us—least of all Sister Micha—wanted to dispute the Siyudad's legitimacy. Rather, although Suprema in some sense represented an unconventional figure for those of us sitting around the table, we all very much respected her initiative and inspirational capacities. And we were more interested in learning from her than in challenging her. Over lunch, Mei actively solicited Siyudad advice with respect to her own obviously quite current concerns. She needed help, she explained. She had previously confided to the rest of us that she was having a problem locating a good father for the baby she wanted to have. Immaculate conception didn't seem to be working very well, and she couldn't find the right man; gentle men, she averred, were somehow too wimpy, but other men were too macho.

In actuality, her problem appeared more a matter of the ways in which her understandings of ideal masculinity were culture bound than anything else—as Mr. Santos himself observed, taking umbrage at the suggestion that gentle men were wimpy. After all, although a product of Philippine gender socialization, Mr. Santos now subscribed to a religion explicitly valuing so-called feminine emotional sensitivity and clearly now defined himself as and took pride in being a gentle (but not, he assured us, wimpy) man, moving toward Siyudad ideals of androgyny. On the other hand, however much our host objected to Mei's terms and however adamant his exhortations to focus only on our inner selves, he was ready to play a chivalrous role when given the opportunity. Having chided Mei for her choosiness, he suggested that she come to the Siyu-

dad should she find a prospective father who was unavailable or uninterested, and the cult would “send forces to bear on him” to make him available and interested. What’s more, he added, Suprema could determine whether or not the match would be a good one.

Nor did this possibility fail to capture Mei’s imagination. Once apprised of Suprema’s prophetic capacities, she revealed that she already had two men in mind. One, she admitted, was insufficiently spiritual; the other, she said, was insufficiently political. Yet she wanted a husband and a baby enough to accept either man were he only to tell her, “I am meant to be your husband and the father of your baby.” Was that all she needed? Mr. Santos laughed—no problem; he could find someone to say that to her! Seriously, though, why not inquire of Suprema which of the two was most suitable, if she really thought one of them might be worth it? All she had to do was write her name and those of the men on separate sheets of paper, which Mr. Santos handed to a rather stocky woman who added the number of letters in each, prior to commencing more obscure numerological calculations. Reviewing the results, Suprema then warned Mei that the first of her prospective spouses would be a good business partner but not a good marriage partner: were they to wed, she would be rich but unhappy. She would get along very well with the other in marriage, in contrast, but would find herself either impoverished or widowed within a couple of years were they to tie the knot. It was best, in short, to find someone else entirely, a verdict with which Mr. Santos fully agreed, adding that Suprema could have said all this before looking at the numbers if she hadn’t been so polite. He himself had immediately known neither relationship was right because Mei had prefaced the interview with an expression of dissatisfaction.

If Mei was distressed by all of this, however, she didn’t argue with Suprema’s conclusions, and neither such negative results nor her own skepticism deterred Gretta, in turn, from asking Suprema to assess her own prospects with a boyfriend back home. Mr. Santos was next, too—indicating immediate agreement when the high priestess told him that his marriage was workable yet sometimes argumentative and that he should be careful because he was gullible and vulnerable to people desirous of taking advantage of him. “That’s true, that’s true,” he exclaimed, issuing only the mild objection that he still preferred to be trusting than cynical. Then Sister Micha spoke up—would Suprema mind answering a question about her parents? She was worried about their health and felt torn between her convent life and their desire for her to come home to stay with them in their old age. Both cultural

obligations to parental obedience and the specter of parental disapproval were weighing heavily on her.

Whatever the strength of the sister's concerns, though, it is notable that she was asking Suprema, rather than one of her convent superiors, for advice. In other words, the possibility of the priestess's divinatory capacity was intriguing enough to evoke a significant response from our party. With the encouragement and backing of Mr. Santos, Suprema effectively and intensely engaged our interest on not only an intellectual, but also an emotional level. And this, in turn, provided the priestess a means of advancing her larger claims to prophetic power and religious validity. By inviting and responding to questions of great affective importance through an apparently innocuous and benevolent desire to help us with her psychic insight, Suprema both successfully insured our attention and reaffirmed her own declarations of special knowledge.

Indeed, however disappointed at the specifics of Suprema's predications, Mei, in particular, was hooked—the first step to conversion. She talked about the priestess's predictions throughout the remainder of the afternoon, her faith in the woman's prophetic capacity on such a personal scale rendering Suprema's claims to foresee world catastrophe and salvation on a grander scale appear all the more plausible. In some sense, then, Suprema's divinatory antics can be understood as the strategic display of a visionary capacity to which we would at least momentarily defer and by way of which we might be persuaded of her larger historical declarations. Moreover, Suprema's demonstrations index the importance belief in prophesy to the cult itself. Prophesy could be employed to dictate action, renegotiate subjugated positions, defy structures of dominance in the Philippines, and, significantly, win new devotees.

A PHILIPPINE PROMISED LAND

As mentioned earlier, the Siyudad's prophetic tradition began with the revelation of seven sacred sites on Mount Banahaw. And, while the sun was already setting by the time we reached Dolores, Mr. Santos and his comrades took us partway along the pilgrimage cycle the day we arrived.¹¹ After showing us our rooms, our host introduced Tito, a self-proclaimed faith healer who would serve as our guide to the first three sacred stations of the Siyudad sequence. It did not matter that none of us were believers: cult membership was no more required here than

was Catholicism in the SSC chapel, where I was welcomed to vespers despite my admitted agnosticism. But we would be expected to respectfully observe silence at the shrines, and we had to be open to experiencing the mountain, even, Tito warned us, when that meant getting wet.

Not that getting wet counted as much of a tribulation by local reckoning. Our caterpillar line soon came upon a small *sari sari* store advertising not only a wide assortment of amulets for sale—hibiscus seeds for protection and a full purse, black triangles featuring the Eye of the Goddess, engraved wooden shapes for health and luck, and seed beads of the sort our guide himself sported around his neck—but also plastic bottles for the collection of holy water. And our first stop entailed a trek down a 267-step rock stairway to the river below, where at length we came to a few rather thin rivulets of water streaming down from the foliage covering the chasm walls above. If the scene was less than spectacular, it nevertheless marked an important part of the pilgrim's journey: this, Tito announced, was Santa Lucia Falls, the very name testifying to the degree to which the Siyudad, however anticolonialist, has appropriated the signs and terms of popular Filipino Christianity. While the falls were little more than a shower spray at this time of year, bathing in the water would be healing and cleansing, not to mention good for menstrual problems.

We would have to bathe separately, though—women first. Notwithstanding its ultimate androgynous ideals, the sect still maintained strict gender distinctions doubtless of particular importance under the wash of falls not only associated with nonreproductive female physiological functions but also meant to purify us in preparation for the rest of our pilgrim's progress. Or was it instead some Siyudad form of chivalry that required male patience while, one by one, the Scholastics and our international party waded in, climbing over rocks and braving the fast flow of the river with concerted efforts to keep our *tsinelas* (sandals) on? Whatever the logic of the bathing order, however, the act itself was calming, the efficacy of the rite a matter not of reasoned persuasion or preaching but of the sounds and feel of the river's rhythms. Nor are such forms of worship surprising, as devotees believe the natural landscape the sign of something over and above the visible. For the Siyudad, in fact, the "whole mountain is a sacred symbol for 'God the Mother' who became incarnate in Maria Bernarda Balitaan" (Quibuyen 1991, 13); indeed, on our way down to the falls, Tito had paused to point out a huge boulder he identified as the Teadro Mental, a "magnificent cathedral in the other dimension."

Not that Tito wanted us soaking too long, though—notwithstanding the blissful sighs emanating from a watery pool to which Sister Micha, apparently unconcerned about missing vespers, had abandoned herself. Once the men completed their ablutions, he hurried us on our way further up the mountain, heedless of the sister’s good-humored grumbling that the hike was making her feel all of her thirty-seven years. After all, the light was fading, and, deep inside an underground cave with minimal dry space, Jacob’s Well could only accommodate ten of us at a time. If Santa Lucia Falls hadn’t been sufficiently persuasive of the mountain’s sanctity, however, the descent into Jacob’s Well certainly contributed to the effect. Even barefoot, I found it a difficult climb down. Bereft of vision, I had to cast myself around to gain a foothold—twisting my body to fit between the cracks until, in some consternation, I found myself dangling in empty space with no choice but to trust Tito’s instructions to lie on my back and drop. Of course, ultimately, that was precisely the point. Once we were all safe within the heart of the cavern, Tito told us the descent itself was a test of sorts. Getting to the well in the first place signified, for the *Siyudad*, the ability to let go of guilt—else one would get stuck. Likewise, faith was important here: faith in our guide, faith in ourselves, and faith in the very ground below us.

Admittedly, negotiating the cave was only half the ritual. After explaining the importance of the station, Tito directed our attention to a ladder extending down a crevice in the cave floor. The chasm was filled with water, shining an opaque shade of pale blue under the glow of several small candles carefully melted into the surrounding nooks and crannies. A strong sulfur stench pervaded the air above, enough to wrinkle our noses and inspire Sister Micha’s protests that this was “not her fault.” No, it was the water that smelled, Tito assured us with a smile; it was not river water, but rather came from some underground source. The stink shouldn’t deter us, however—the idea was to climb down the ladder and submerge oneself three times. “See?” he said, indicating his own wet jeans and shirtless state in what was doubtless intended to be an encouraging gesture. And, for the matter, the water was indeed both pleasantly warm and surprisingly buoyant. Ducking under took the edge off the night’s chill, and I could almost swear I felt the underground vibrations Tito claimed testimony to the power of the place.

Our next stop, in contrast, made for a more sedate experience. The Twin Caves of Peter and Paul had less to do with the proof of faith than with “presentation,” Tito explained. Now that we were cleansed of person and conscience, we could offer our respects to the ancient deities

of the mountain, those “even older than God.” Never mind the apparent incongruity of the simultaneous reference here to biblical figures and pre-Christian tradition; the Siyudad freely combines elements of Roman Catholicism and indigenous animism. God is in actuality only one of many divinities believers worship, including, again, the mountain itself.¹²

Thus, we once more descended into the very body of Banahaw to pay it homage, climbing down a long ladder to the comparatively accessible and spacious cavern floor, where Tito somberly handed each of us lighted candles to concretize our devotion at the double altars below. Both were already well illuminated by the offerings of previous supplicants, and this time we were not only allowed but even encouraged to linger in the caves. This was our final stop that night, and, while it was dark and late for dinner, the caves were supposed to be a place of quiet prayer and introspection, such “presentation” affording both a fitting culmination to the evening’s explorations and fitting preparation for our meeting with Suprema on the morrow.

MAKING MAGIC

Indeed, the effects of the pilgrimage are meant to endure beyond the term of the journey itself, and, observing Mei making for the comfort room back at the rest house, Mr. Santos warned us not to rinse ourselves off or wash our hair. Not that we couldn’t wipe our feet of the mud we were in danger of tracking in, or wash our hands in preparation for a sumptuous dinner of vegetables, beef, chicken, rice, soup and tea—it was more that it was nonsensical, in Siyudad eyes, to talk of further cleaning ourselves of what was supposed to have been cleansing itself in a fashion far transcendent of the ordinary *tabo* system. After all, this wasn’t just a matter of bodily purification—the pilgrimage also, and more importantly, engendered spiritual purification. For the Siyudad, it was a healing journey of the soul as well as the corporeal person, and, Mr. Santos informed us, visiting even just the first three stations of the cycle should have induced a meditative state of mind.

In fact, with a certain degree of faith in our capacity for such spiritual experience, our host suggested that we attempt a “mystical exercise” of sorts after dinner. Once the table was cleared, he rather proudly brought out several recently acquired U.S.-made Magic Eye books featuring pictures hidden behind multicolored patterns perceptible only

when stared at long enough with slightly unfocused vision. And, while Carmen, Gretta, and I were already familiar with such visual illusions, Mei and Sister Micha were both suitably impressed. At Mr. Santos's prompting, both quickly became caught up in the attempt to find the hidden images. Indeed, the sister in particular pored over one of the books with a remarkable intensity of purpose, exclaiming at every success. What's more, Mr. Santos took her keen interest as confirmation of Mount Banahaw's spiritual efficacy. Significantly, for him, discerning the Magic Eye pictures was not merely a game but an index of mystical capacity. In fact, I suspect the discovery of new signs beneath the obvious even in images manufactured for sale was, for our host, analogous to perceiving the other dimension of which Tito had spoken.

Nor, for that matter, did Carmen or Sister Micha dispute our host's claims that our collective capacity for identifying the Magic Eye pictures might have something to do with our having just returned from our pilgrimage. Carmen herself commented that one had to be able to go into a trance to see the hidden drawings—although she explained this not so much in *Siyudad* terms as in what, for her, were more scientific terms. Like the rest of our group, she was conversant with the distinctions made by much of Western science between right and left brain functions—the former having to do with artistry, emotion, and visual skill, the latter a matter more of logical reasoning and verbal skill. In this case, she said, it seemed as if one had to let the right brain take over in order to correctly see the images—an endeavor involving imagination more than rationality. “Yes!” added Sister Micha, very much in agreement and excited by the possibilities all this suggested. This could be wonderful training for new entrants, she gleefully observed. She would advocate the use of such books during the postulancy: entrants unable to find the pictures behind the patterns wouldn't be allowed to advance.

Not, of course, that the sister was serious—no matter how adamant her self-defense when Mr. Santos and Carmen responded with appreciative and amused queries concerning her apparent desire to weed out all left-brained initiates. On the other hand, like most of Sister Micha's jokes, the suggestion was telling. Many of my informants spoke of visions or other sorts of extraordinary religious experiences in explaining why they had joined the convent, remember. And, if, from the Missionary Benedictine perspective, neither the Magic Eye pictures nor Tito's talk of another dimension was quite equivalent to seeing God, the idea that something sacred might be discerned beyond the

immediately visible was certainly compatible with, if not central to, the nuns' faith. If Mr. Santos could recognize the possibilities of a spiritual practice in the books, then, it made sense to me that Sister Micha might see the same, albeit from a somewhat different religious standpoint. While the Magic Eye pictures were not themselves miraculous, the appeal in both cases was clear. Identifying the secrets behind or within the pictures involved altering perception and remaining open to the possibility of seeing something invisible to ordinary sight. Likewise, whether a matter of locating cathedrals in boulders or God's hand in every occurrence, spirituality for both the Siyudad and the sisters was at least in part a matter of seeing the real picture behind the face of the mundane world.

Moreover, if there was some irony in the use of books published in the United States and marketed as entertainment in order to exercise "mystical" perception, such usage again testifies to Filipino creativity in appropriating foreign (and secular) artifacts for new purposes. While the Magic Eye books signify participation in a global market to which the Siyudad and the Missionary Benedictines alike are opposed on principle, our nipa hut experimentation altered the meanings of such Americana, transforming capitalist artifacts into meditative tools in an arguably counterhegemonic move.

ORIENTALISM?

The Magic Eye books weren't all, however. As we prepared to turn in, Sister Micha suggested the use of yet another originally alien tradition as spiritual exercise. *Shibashi*, a Chinese form of physical and meditative practice characterized by a series of highly controlled and poetically defined movements, is both regularly practiced by the sisters and taught to students at the Institute of Women's Studies. And Sister Micha volunteered to teach us the movements, too. Even if we couldn't really learn all eighteen steps in just one night, she thought we'd find it fun to at least try them out. We might appreciate the fact, too, that the sequences were modeled on the natural world. Indeed, *shibashi* carries arguably environmentalist ideological messages of particular relevance to both the Siyudad and the Missionary Benedictines. The tradition as a whole is premised on a belief system celebrating the harmony and beauty of nature (itself always a cultural construct) as well as an ideal of integration and unity, both within the self and in the world. The basic

idea is that both spiritual and physical accord can be attained by imitating, and thereby in some sense absorbing the essence of, the stork, for example, or the rainbow.

On the other hand, while the appeal of *shibashi*—a meditative system specifically grounded in the perceived sanctity of natural phenomena—to the nuns is clear, Sister Micha herself readily acknowledged that such spiritual use of the natural differentiates *shibashi* from traditional Catholic forms of ascetic practice. Slowly bringing her hands together in demonstration of the first of the eighteen steps, she informed us that the movement was intended as a representation of the meeting of matter and soul, the possibility of which, she observed, ran counter to Christian dualism. After all, she added, moving on to the next sequence—and then the next—while Western spirituality divides the physical world and the spirit, “Oriental” spirituality integrates the two.

Of course, significantly, such observations beg the question of where the sister locates her own faith. As noted earlier, she was proud of being Christian in a country itself proud to be “the only Christian country in Asia.” Moreover, she took pride in her ability to speak English and her relative cosmopolitan sophistication. Yet she also frequently defined herself as “Oriental” in response to my curiosity about and sometime befuddlement at aspects of her world she took for granted. In such instances, Sister Micha would often suggest that my bewilderment or amazement resulted from the fact that I was Western, and it—whatever it was—was “an Oriental thing,” thereby selectively, if temporarily, invoking her Asianness and downplaying her own affiliation with an originally Western religious order. Likewise, in claiming both knowledge of and expertise at *shibashi*, the sister seemed to be prioritizing her Asianness over her allegiance to a Catholic congregation, even critiquing Catholic dualism. In other words, recalling Mei’s talk of being a Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian-Christian, Sister Micha was quick to manipulate her position and identity in order to appropriate a wide range of different (and sometimes apparently opposed) traditions, depending on circumstances. In the end, then, Sister Micha simply didn’t permanently align herself with either Western or “Oriental” practice. Rather, she appeared perfectly happy to play with the artificial distinctions marking modern geography, the ease with which she shifted her allegiances both evidencing a fluid sense of identity in notable contraposition to the assumption that the self is (or should be) a unified construct and reflecting the value placed on appropriation and adaptation as historically conditioned means of engaging with otherness in the Philippines.¹³

MULTIPLE MODES OF IDENTIFICATION

Sister Micha was not the only one of the nuns to elide such easy attempts at anthropological definition, either. As discussed previously, many of the Missionary Benedictines demonstrated an eclectic and ecumenical approach to faith. Indeed, their very interest in the *Siyudad* goes hand in hand with a larger interest in the incorporation and appropriation of alternative religious (and even secular) traditions across the globe. Of course, in part, such creative religious flexibility might be put down to technological advances affording new opportunities for religious exchange, through print and video, not to mention the international conferences and travel in which many of my informants engaged. Likewise, such engagement with the *Siyudad* may reflect the comparative self-determinative freedom afforded religious congregations following Vatican II, in addition to the Catholic Church's growing interest in ecumenical endeavors since the 1960s. Yet the existence of new technologies and looser Church policies does not explain the positive drive necessary for the sort of radicalization and globalization at issue here. Rather, I would suggest that the sorts of examples cited in this book reflect the specific position of my informants as spiritually oriented Filipinas.

As suggested earlier, the Missionary Benedictines are making a strong claim to Philippineness through maintaining connections with *Suprema*. This not only provides the sisters legitimation as Filipinas, however, but also—and therefore—enables a concomitant commitment to the exploration of other, non-Filipino faiths. In short, the nuns' very engagement in both interpretive and investigative practices securing their national identity effectively allows the additional use of foreign resources without fear of either internal or external accusations of national betrayal. It is no coincidence, then, to find the sisters simultaneously spending time with the *Siyudad* (a nationalist practice) and referencing foreign cultural traditions (an internationalist practice). The former renders the latter possible; the latter, by the same token, probably renders the former all the more imperative. And either way or both ways, the nuns appear to be adopting ever more fluid understandings of faith in transcending the boundaries between this and that, here and there.

Nor should such shifts in self-identification and presentation be understood as contradicting the claim that personal and moral integrity are of value to the Missionary Benedictines. Rather, the very fact that the nuns subscribe to a well-developed doctrine of the soul

arguably not only reflects the instability of their experience across different times and places, but is also productive of a certain flexibility in response to external circumstances. According to my informants, all that is really important is the commitment to serving God wherever and whenever possible. In fact, Sister Virginia explicitly assured me that she cared less about the specifics of religious identification than about one's ability to love. Thus, it didn't matter to her that I was agnostic, much less that one of her sisters was *Iglesia ni Kristo* and two of her siblings had converted to Islam, as long as we were all good people. Ideological affiliations and shifting situational requirements remain secondary to "being (and doing) good."

The fact that the nuns attribute more significance to personal responsibility than external detail not only engenders a certain degree of religious tolerance, however, but also, as intimated earlier, affords a surprising degree of behavioral freedom. Thus, Sister Micha could freely don civilian clothes, skip her scheduled prayers, and participate in a pagan pilgrimage apt to be condemned by the Vatican, professing all of this fully in accord with her core Missionary Benedictine values. It is worth noting Sister Josephine's self-confessed dabbling in both ancient Chinese and New Age cures for insomnia, too, including not only a hypnosis tape and assorted relaxation exercises but also snake blood and a special Chinese oil that altered her body temperature. The sister additionally put great faith in a Chinese-Filipino doctor she knew, not to mention popular American New Age guru Louise Hay, both of whom advocate self-forgiveness. Now, she told me, she looked in the mirror every day to tell herself she loved herself. And, if she hit her finger or something, she now simply said "Sorry" to it instead of castigating herself for her stupidity. In other words, like Sister Micha, she was quite willing to entertain (and even adopt) religious alternatives to traditional Filipino understandings of Catholicism without in any way perceiving herself to be contradicting the central tenets of her Missionary Benedictine faith.

MGA MADRENG BABAYLAN

Similarly, the Mga Madreng Babaylan, a ritual group to which Carmen invited me, freely borrowed from outside sources. In fact, I got my first taste of the remarkably accommodating and diversified nature of my informants' spirituality while in the company of the Mga Madreng Babaylan, who regularly met at Nursia (the IWS headquarters) as part

of a larger effort to create a forum within which Filipinas can develop new forms of religious practice of particular relevance to them as both women and Philippine citizens.

To begin with, the very name of the ritual group was significant. *Madre*, a Spanish-derived term, means “nun” in Tagalog, while, as previously indicated, *babaylan* means “priestess,” referencing the usually female religious authorities of the indigenous Filipino past. And the conjunction of the two words is interesting. Like the relationship newly formed between the Missionary Benedictines and Suprema, the phrase *Madreng Babaylan* symbolically draws together two historically disparate and often conflictual traditions—traditions integrated in the name of and simultaneously reaffirming the efficacy of Filipina religious expertise. Admittedly, most of those in attendance were in fact nuns, and nuns are granted at least some public recognition as spiritual adepts within the modern-day Philippine context. On the other hand, the power sisters hold within the official Church hierarchy remains limited—and this is where the second half of the equation comes in. No matter that the Vatican fails to recognize female priests, these *babaylanes* could identify themselves as modern-day, and indisputably Filipina, priestesses by invoking a cultural heritage dating back to the pre-Hispanic era—a heritage, significantly, also invoked within Siyudad practice. Participation in the ritual group, in other words, held the promise of the same sort of national and nationalist reaffirmation afforded by participation in the Siyudad pilgrimage.

Indeed, Sister Flora, or “Nona,” made the importance of being *babaylan* explicit in her introduction to the ritual. The Filipina *babaylanes* of the past, she said, had been part of a precolonial women’s ministry, a healing ministry, dating back to a time when, according to her understanding of the situation, women were “more equal” to men. But, she continued, the *babaylanes* had been persecuted by the Spaniards and had been forced to go into hiding and adopt other tactics of resistance. In other words, this was a history of the repression and suppression of indigenous female religious authority by patriarchal and often violent colonial powers. And, while this wasn’t a unique history—there were witch-hunts in Europe, too—it was important for modern-day Filipinas to know, identify with, and take pride in their own heritage.

Of course, this morning’s session was more specifically intended as a “Sharing Workshop on Women and Spirituality.” Nona herself had chosen the title and topic and had come prepared with an eclectic assortment of materials for our use: green, red, purple, yellow, and beige woven mats and equally colorful pillows to soften our seats; a black-

board pulled up to one side; and two ceramic pots containing glass jars. What's more, she commenced with the assertion that we could and should share our gifts as women with the world. She had planned a ritual to this end rather than a lecture because spirituality, in her opinion, was as much a matter of experience as something "in the head." Unfortunately, however, female participation in spiritual practice has often gone unrecognized. We might consider, for instance, the biblical story of the coming of the spirits. In the story, Nona observed, all the people gathered in the upper room, including the apostles, are named. Or are they? Mary is the only woman mentioned but did this really mean she was the only woman present? Maybe other women, who weren't acknowledged, were there, too. The latter seemed more probable to Nona: after all, the Bible often ignores women or refers to them simply as "the prostitutes" or "the good women."

We had it in our power to change that, though—beginning now. At Nona's direction, we went around the room in circular fashion, exchanging introductions. Sister Lucia began by observing that her religious name meant "light" and that, true to her name, she liked getting up early and getting things done during the light of day. Next, Josimar, a former novice working at the IWS, identified herself, followed by the elderly Sister Lola, Sister Patricia, Sister Bella, and a lay candle maker named Mimi. Our number also included another local lay Filipina, a sister in Manila on break from her work in the provinces, one of the women undertaking Trainor's Training at the IWS, an Australian visitor, Sister Felicity, three RGS novices, Carmen, Nona, and, of course, me, the anthropologist with the unpronounceable name and bizarre research interest in nuns.

Nor was the exercise inconsequential. It not only somewhat predictably broke the ice but also, as Nona suggested, provided a means of symbolically reclaiming the right to spiritual expertise and apostleship long denied women by the Catholic Church. Self-determination is of particular importance in the Philippines, too, given the nation's long colonial history. While we might think of names as a given, as almost an inalienable right, the Spanish early on imposed their own appellatory system on the indigenous tribes of the archipelago in order to better track local populations for both military and tax purposes (relocating villages to the lowlands for the same reasons). Thus, a great many Filipino names are in fact Hispanic in character and origin, often as not ironically dependent on distinctions between *p* and *f* or *v* and *b*, otherwise allophones in Filipino. Although the use of Spanish-sounding names is now very Filipino indeed, such usage testifies to and recalls

the influence of the conquistadors—extending even into the most private domains of self-identification and speech.

Insofar as naming can be imposed on a people in such a literal sense for disciplinary purposes, then, reclaiming the right to self-identification has special relevance. Naming oneself affords a certain degree of psychological freedom from, and a potential point of resistance to, hegemonic and biased categories and labels employed by more powerful groups. For Filipinos, this at least potentially means claiming independence from definition by European others—as the savage pagans “saved” by the Spanish missionaries, the “little brown brothers” of a patronizing America, or even, in the modern day, as a friendly but carefree people more concerned with fiestas than with self-betterment.

Consider again, too, the ways in which Filipinas, in particular, are advertised not only as beautiful and sexy, but also as obedient and passive, both within the mail-order bride business, and in a good many tourist guides to the country. Needless to say, such stereotypes do not bode well for Philippine women’s efforts to develop an independent voice. Resisting such assumptions about Filipina femininity is important to feminist efforts within the country, and both private and public self-identification may represent a critical step toward such resistance.

Indeed, Nona’s insistence on the exchange of introductions is consistent with a more general IWS philosophy of women’s empowerment. The institute’s programs and courses often begin with autobiography; the Trainor’s Training students, for example, all routinely create altars of personal significance to discuss with one another—sufficing not only to facilitate group familiarity, but also effectively validating their lives. Here, as among the Madreng Babaylan, women’s words and stories of self are quite intentionally given special emphasis, largely in response to (and in an attempt to challenge) the tendency of primarily male governmental, political, and legal agents to ignore the narrative female voice.

SISTER WATER

If simply making oneself heard could be revolutionary, though, Nona suggested that it was important not only to speak out ourselves but also to attend to the voices of the world around us. She concluded our round-robin with the observation that her indigenous family name meant “lake” or “body of water.” And water, she noted, both makes up 75 percent of the human body and plays a significant role in nature. In

fact, she continued, showing us a picture of a Mexican woman rising out of a pool, we were all here with “Sister Water.” Sister Water wanted us to take the time to listen to her, too—in this case, in the form of a music tape meant to evoke the sense of a bubbling brook. This, Nona said, should help us to meditate, to go to our depths, like reaching into a well in order to achieve a state of *pagtining ng tubig ng buhay* (“being still at and from the depths” or “the coming together of the water of life from the very depths of stillness”).¹⁴

So we sat in silence for a while, with the cassette playing in the background. Then Nona quietly directed each of us to rise at our leisure and pour a small quantity of water from a thermos set up on a nearby table into one of several pink plastic cups she had brought with her. The process was meant to inspire contemplation: we could drink from our cups if we wished or simply think about the water inside. We might think, for example, of mountain springs and waterfalls full of *masarap* (“sweet”) and *malamig* (“cold”) water. Could we taste this, could we savor it in our minds? If that was good, though, it was also important to think about how Sister Water is dying, how the earth is drying up. Many people have to struggle to get water now, Nona observed—one only had to consider the large numbers of modern-day Filipinas forced to stand in line for hours in order to obtain cooking and drinking water.

Indeed, water is of great concern in the Philippines. Running water, especially hot water, is still something of a luxury within even Manilaño households. In many *barangays*, residents still pump their water from wells. Nor is water guaranteed to those households outfitted with plumbing: in my own apartment complex, the water pumps stopped working every time the electricity went out. But water could also be dangerously present. Stagnant pools are prime mosquito breeding grounds, and during the rainy season, the streets of Manila sometimes become flooded to such an extent that traffic stops entirely and schools and businesses are forced to close. More seriously yet, the news often carries stories of entire coastal villages destroyed by tidal flooding. In short, in the Philippine context, Sister Water represents both an important resource and potentially menacing force, both life and death, both something special and something everyday—all in all, an evocative metaphor for spiritual sensitivity.

What’s more, the idea that spirituality, like water, is inherent and everyday rather than derived from and located in a heavenly sphere distinguished from the physical world and expressed or demonstrated through Church ritual, effectively returns spiritual power and self-determination to the individual, again subverting the terms of ortho-

dox Philippine Catholicism. As noted earlier, much of traditional Catholic theology opposes woman, nature, and the secular to man, soul, and the sacred. Indeed, such oppositions have been used to justify an exclusively male priesthood. Redefining spirituality in terms of a mundane yet simultaneously miraculously life-giving (and death-dealing) substance such as water, however, may afford women a means of reappropriating Catholic dichotomies in order to place spirituality within their own province. By asking us to imagine women drawing water from wells, then, Nona was in effect suggesting an alternative way of conceptualizing faith, granting us, as women, the power of our own “natural” religious expertise, located in the “wells” of personal experience rather than in the annals of a patriarchal Church history or classical biblical tradition.

Nona was not the only one to make such religious use of water, either. As already demonstrated, water is also important to the Siyudad Mistika pilgrimage cycle as both a natural and a nationalist source of spiritual cleansing and augmentation. For the Siyudad, bathing in the water of Santa Lucia Falls or of Jacob’s Well is healing partly precisely because a means of participation in the bounty of the native soil itself, something configured as sacred and a source of blessings in its own right. The suggestion here, in other words, is that the waters of Mount Banahaw—and of the Philippines itself—could both wash away the dirt of material (capitalist and foreign) temptation and cure ailments understood by the Siyudad in some way to be rooted in psychological and physical alienation from the nation.

A FLUID FAITH

It is worth noting that water lacks definite edges or boundaries of its own, too. In fact, bodies of water lose their congruency when mixed with other bodies of water, and in some sense, all the water on earth is part of a single, global cycle. Water, in short, flows across local and national lines, and thus might be taken as symbolic of both general psychological flexibility and appropriative ability. In other words, Nona’s suggestion that we think of our spirituality in terms of water might be understood as an implicit call for the development of ever more fluid understandings of faith, extending to the limits of our own personal capacity for incorporation and tolerance. After all, a self-professed Zen practitioner as well as a Catholic nun, Nona herself clearly did not feel her own faith could (or should) be contained by definitional lines

drawn between different bodies of doctrine; nor did she appear to think her spirituality could (or should) be confined only to particular spaces and times. And her example underlines the more general importance of such fluidity within my informants' lives.

Admittedly, symbols such as water should not necessarily be taken as literal indications of social or psychological phenomena. Nevertheless, the ways in which people employ symbols can significantly illuminate the ways in which they experience and conceive of reality, and Nona's use of water imagery reflects a fluid, global, and appropriative understanding of faith in many different respects. For one thing, it is significant that she incorporated alternative religious materials into the Madreng Babaylan ritual at issue. Notwithstanding important parallels between Mexican and Philippine colonial (and missionary) history, Sister Water was originally Mexican, not Filipina. And Nona also made use of her Zen Buddhist training during that morning's session. As each of us held our pink plastic cups, meditating on the water inside, Nona began slowly, repeatedly, striking a small gong she used in her Zen practice.

She directed us to "dive into" ourselves in order to tap the spontaneous images "born of our own depths" while listening to the beat, too—again suggesting the possibility of a spirituality not only flowing over national boundaries but also springing from an inner source. When she thought about her faith, she told us, she often found herself remembering her childhood: for example, she had vivid memories of standing at her parents' windows watching the sun when a mere toddler. In her eyes, religion, she explained, was not only or by any means primarily a philosophical practice but rather was rooted in experience, and particularly in our earliest, least well socialized, and least analytical experiences—recalling Sister Micha's frozen moments and Sister Placid's recollections of Mount Mayon.

And we might further consider alternative forms of spiritual expression, such as drawing, for example, rather than the mere verbalization more typical of Catholic prayer sessions. After allowing us several minutes of contemplation to the sound of the gong, then, Nona asked each of us to try sketching out some sort of representation of our memories, with colored crayons themselves reminiscent of childhood. Insofar as this was a sharing ritual, too, she suggested that we ultimately share the results with one another, offering up our creations at a makeshift altar in the middle of the room. Thus, we all poured some of our water into the afore mentioned jars—our communal Nursia well—in symbolic testimony to the mutual respect nurturing our individual intentions. Lastly, we formed a circle, our arms around one another's waists, while

Nona recounted the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman who gave him a drink despite his potentially threatening alien nationality. While the point in part was that Christ ultimately gave her a drink of the water of life by way of thanks, it was also worth noting that the episode highlights a woman's generosity across the boundaries of the known. This, Nona concluded, was her kind of spirituality. Notwithstanding the ways in which Christianity has been institutionalized, Jesus himself, she felt represents a spirituality marked by tolerance, acceptance, and flexibility rather than one defined by the rigid lines of religious dogma.

Babae-Lalaki

And this, of course, brings us back to the Siyudad, as a tradition also concerned with the creative construction of specifically Filipina religious expertise in defiance of Catholic norms. Consider, once again, the Siyudad chapel. While the portraits of Rizal caught my attention first, there were other posters decorating the church walls further up from the entrance, too, depicting the mythological origins and future of the cult. One featured an apparent androgyne captioned *Babae-Lalaki*, or "woman-man." Was this a fantasy of the ideal freedom fighter, clothed here in military uniform as an indication of Siyudad's concern with independence?

In actuality, Mr. Santos informed me, the hermaphrodite was none other than Maria Bernarda Balitaan, the aforementioned founder of the cult. If now deceased, however, she nevertheless represents the nation's final hope. In fact, the portrait of the *babae-lalaki* depicts an imagined future wherein Maria Bernarda will rise again as a doubly gendered (and thus fully balanced) savior of sorts, heralding humanity's reunion with God. According to the cult's logic, the millennial history of the Philippines (and the world) will culminate in her rebirth as a superhuman combining what the Siyudad believe to be the separate skills and virtues of women and men. Indeed, cultists believe that Maria Bernarda's reincarnation will signal the end of life as we know it, as marked by two distinct, consecutive, stages: *ang panahon ng lalake*, the "time of man," and *ang panahon ng babae*, "the time of woman." The historical misfortune of Filipinos is rendered comprehensible and even acceptable when understood in terms of this general trajectory, wherein male (and colonial/neocolonial) dominance has been foreordained as part of the fall of humanity, despite the efforts of men such as

Christ and Rizal (deemed essentially of the same supernatural character, distinguishable only by historical and geographical situation). While Christ and Rizal themselves are recognized to have set key processes in motion, Mr. Santos explained, neither is believed to have succeeded in reconciling the “way of men” and the “way of women.” Now, in the *panahon ng babae*, it was up to Suprema and her priestesses to redress the imbalance in the world.

The justification for the Siyudad’s female leadership, then, lies both in the model provided by Maria Bernarda Balitaan and in the belief that women hold the promise of salvation in the modern day. Nor does this mean the mere substitution of a matriarchy for a patriarchy: the future resides in Maria’s rebirth as *babae-lalaki*. And, in many ways, the idea of the woman-man is coincident with my informants’ talk of coming to terms with alternative forms of womanhood. Sister Micha, for example, played at being a boy as well as a girl both prior to and during formation. As earlier noted, finally accepting herself as a woman meant learning to accept the possibility of retaining femininity while acting in apparently (albeit only stereotypically) masculine ways. In the sister’s experience, then, the integration of both culturally defined male and female behavioral patterns in her own person represented a necessary step toward more complete selfhood.

Of course, admittedly, while Sister Micha’s understanding of womanhood involves the insight that both women and men can (or should be able to) exhibit the sorts of characteristics usually separately attributed to males and females, the Siyudad still very much promotes the belief that femininity and masculinity are distinct and attached to biological sex—the reconciliation of the two possible only with the actual biological reconciliation of both within the *babae-lalaki*. In many ways, in fact, Siyudad understandings of gender mirror those promulgated by Philippine Catholicism. In both cases, femininity implies being more connected to the world of emotions, as distinguished from a more masculine world of logical thinking. The twist here is more a matter of a different understanding of what is and isn’t most desirable in spiritual practice than a matter of radically revised gender norms, then: the Siyudad places greater importance on feeling, whereas, despite its mystical origins, Catholicism grants greater comparative authority to rationality.¹⁵ In some sense, in other words, Siyudad ideology involves not so much a recategorization of stereotypical Catholic classifications as a reassessment of them. Essentialist gender differentiation is still involved here, but, significantly, more spiritual value is granted female emotional sensitivity than male philosophy.

**RECLAIMING THE PHILIPPINE PAST
AS FEMINIST PRACTICE**

Notwithstanding such differences in the ways in which womanhood is defined, however, the Missionary Benedictines remain invested in maintaining connections with the Siyudad precisely because the cult nevertheless affords positive examples of female priestesshood, in marked contrast to the ways in which Catholicism circumscribes female religiosity. What's more, the sisters' interest in the Siyudad and the accord granted women within the Siyudad are both partly a function of the ways in which the Siyudad claims continuity with the pre-Hispanic past. As previously intimated, the Siyudad imagines itself to be preserving an original Filipina priestess tradition. Indeed, cultists reference such indigenous traditions to support their bids for legitimacy (and their nationalist ardor) as marginalized groups in the modern Philippines.

Of course, in reality, despite the dynamics of a nationalistic historical longing and despite the continued use of deep Tagalog, Suprema and her followers are not truly equivalent to or the direct heritors of *babay-lanes* past. Nor should Siyudad claims to continuity with the past be taken at face value: as already noted, the cult makes heavy use of not only pre-Hispanic but also Catholic religious material. In other words, although the Siyudad Mistika can indeed be identified as an indigenous religious form insofar as its genesis and development can be definitively located in Philippine time and space, the cult does not really represent the mere revival of prior Philippine practices. Despite current renderings of the Philippine past in terms of a generalized Philippine experience, the sort of history and Philippineness indexed by Suprema and the Siyudad Mistika are partial with respect to the history of the entire nation.

On the other hand, for the Siyudad, the birth of the country itself is conflated with the birth of the Philippine resistance movement. One of the cult's hymns attributes the emergence of the republic to the symbolic union of Maria Bernarda, conceived as a sort of pseudo-Marian virgin mother, and the already much mythologized Rizal:

The Virgin Maria Bernarda, a Filipina mother
Dr. José Rizal, a Filipino father
Once in a mystery, they came together
And so emerged this country, the Philippines.
(Quibuyen 1991, 10)

Notably, such re-writing of Philippine history is revolutionary in foregrounding anticolonialist resistance efforts and an indigenous perspective, effectively equating the existence of the nation itself—already an artificial construct—with the growth of Filipino self-consciousness.

In actuality, however, as earlier observed, the Philippines is by no means a culturally unified entity—and was not in fact a nation at all prior to colonization. While its many islands are now subject to the rule of one government, and its many traditions are claimed as Filipino (although not equally so in all contexts), the republic ironically owes its unification to the very colonialist presence that so disrupted the integrity of its various member communities. The islands currently forming what both the larger world and their inhabitants themselves now think of as the Philippines represent, in some sense, a rather arbitrary collection—bound together not by virtue of preexistent cultural or linguistic similarities, but rather by the geographically empirical whim of the Spanish. Nor were all the peoples of what was defined in European terms as “the Philippines” equally affected by, or rebellious against, Spanish rule. Indeed, the lowland Tagalogs were amongst those most thoroughly engaged with the foreigners; after all, the Spanish established their governmental base in what eventually became known as Manila—while the mountain tribes and the Muslim communities of Mindanao had much less contact with the invaders, and undoubtedly experienced the exploitative excesses of the Spanish quite differently.

In other words, while this is not the place to attempt a more detailed account of the many probable divergences of Philippine history as experienced by Filipinos themselves, it is important to note that the history of the revolutionaries and devotees hiding out in Mt. Banahaw is by no means pan-Philippine. It is, rather, a very localized, and in many respects Tagalog-based, history. While the widely known and widely taught story of José Rizal has now very much been appropriated by both the Philippine government and Philippine nationalists as a key chapter in Philippine history (indeed, Rizal is configured by both parties as a national hero—nor is he unfit for the position, although some Philippine nationalists feel the recognition granted him has eclipsed widespread recognition of less intellectual, less pacifist, less elite and potentially more dangerous rebel leaders like Bonifacio and Aguinaldo), the fact remains that many Filipinos of Rizal’s era were not necessarily as concerned with theoretical questions of freedom, rights, and nationhood as were Rizal and his *ilustrado* friends.

So, the history indexed by the Siyudad can not in any strictly

genealogical sense be conflated with the histories of its individual members, nor, for that matter, with the histories of the individual Missionary Benedictines. Certainly, this ancestral history was not that of the urban Mr. Santos, nor of the Visayan Sister Micha, and the very attempts made by the Siyudad and the sisters alike to appropriate such rather essentialized understandings of the past necessarily entail strategic elisions—inexact and ambiguous equations across both time and space obscuring the diverse actualities of their multiple and varied ancestries and everyday experiences. On the other hand, if Suprema and her followers do not really exemplify the unadulterated Philippineness that they appear to claim for themselves, and that many of my informants locate in them, the Siyudad still holds clear symbolic value, its historical pretensions reflecting an understandable projective desire to legitimate present practices through identification with a national past. After all, history—always anyway open to strategic manipulation and subject to competing interpretations, particularly in cases such as that of the poorly documented and highly speculative pre-Hispanic Philippines—holds ideological currency in the modern day republic, as a country struggling to develop a coherent national identity in an increasingly transnational world. What is important here, then, is not actual continuity with the pre-Hispanic past, but, rather, the cult's very desire to revive or carry on (and the sisters' desire to believe in) something retrospectively constructed as natively Philippine.

And, again, the emphasis placed on specifically *female* religious expertise within the Siyudad is of particular significance. Notably, feminism is viewed with widespread suspicion in the Philippines. As will presently be discussed at greater length, the general Philippine populace presumes it threatening to “family values.” Moreover, notwithstanding sometime efforts to forward women's rights within the larger nationalist movement, the Philippine left in general dismisses it as a product of objectionable western influences, and as necessarily secondary to concerns of nationality and class. Nor is this surprising; in light of what might now be termed relatively popular Philippine leftist academic critiques of the ways in which American influences on Philippine ideology have neglected and obscured the Philippine experience, the anticolonialist and postcolonial desire of Filipino radicals to dissociate themselves from feminism, and to situate their radicalism within Philippine history, is quite comprehensible.

Need being feminist in the Philippines really imply capitulation to the hegemony of Western feminist concerns, though? Both Siyudad and sisterly talk of pre-Hispanic *babaylanes* suggests the possibility of

looking to the Philippine past for models of an indigenous feminism of sorts. In fact, many Filipina feminists take pride in the apparent (but difficult to document) egalitarianism of the pre-Hispanic era: “[w]omen in pre-contact times served as ruling queens, priestesses, warriors, and patrons of art. Women in the non-ruling classes worked in the fields, sold their produces in the markets, and engaged in various forms of trading activity” (Aquino 1985, 322–23). Women could also own land and property and hold political leadership positions in the Philippines, and bilateral kinship systems are characteristic of the region—this often being taken as indicative of women’s power. And all of this in turn suggests the possibility of claiming even modern-day forms of Philippine feminism to be derivative from or grounded in Filipino experience, rather than Western experience—a matter of significance to nationalist feminists like the Missionary Benedictines, in particular. In many respects, then, the sisters’ efforts to maintain strong connections with indigenous examples of female Philippine religiosity such as those afforded by the *Siyudad* reflect a desire to reaffirm their legitimacy within the Philippines itself. In identifying their own religious expertise with that of experts such as Suprema in turn identified (if only partially) with the Philippine past (notably, a revolutionary, anti-colonialist, and even anti-Catholic past), the sisters are arguably symbolically relocating themselves within their country of origin not only as *babaylanes* in their own right, but also as feminists.

The Woman Question

I have been arguing that the sisters' involvement with the *Siyudad* represents in part a bid to legitimate their feminist activism, but in what sense(s) are the nuns in fact "feminists"? To begin with, we might examine Sister Justine's apparently significant role in catalyzing Missionary Benedictine (as well as public Filipino) awareness of gender issues. Although the sister is hardly solely responsible for the congregation's feminist leanings, she has attained a certain reputation as a prototypical feminist activist both within and outside the convent. Indeed, my interest in the Missionary Benedictines was initially sparked in part by Sister Justine's public face: I was intrigued by her simultaneous identification as Missionary Benedictine sister, director of the Institute of Women's Studies, and editor of and contributing author to several IWS-sponsored texts on women in the Philippines. Moreover, however diverse their personal understandings of feminism, my interviewees unanimously credited her for their relatively newfound commitment to the cause of women in the Philippines. When I asked my informants how and when they first began critically attending to gender issues, all mentioned their colleague by name.

Sister Micha, for example, claimed to have first begun consciously identifying as feminist after having been assigned to St. Scholastica's College as a junior sister. Although Sister Micha had already been exposed to feminist theology during formation, Sister Justine had really been the one to sensitize her to the full importance of gender issues. After all, Sister Justine talked about gender all the time. She would challenge the Missionary Benedictines to use inclusive language, for instance—making for some interesting prayer sessions. What's more, she had enrolled many of the nuns, including Sister Micha, in the pilot course for SSC's women's studies program, which had had a major impact on the congregation.

Likewise, Sister Josephine attributed her understanding of gender dynamics to Sister Justine—who, she told me “has had the widest involvement of all the religious and priests or lay in the country” with women’s issues. After listening to Sister Justine’s comments during communal sharing sessions, Sister Josephine had signed up for a one-month intensive Trainor’s Training session at the IWS. Nor was she the only one. Others of my informants related similar stories: “Sister Justine persuaded me to enroll in one of the IWS classes”; “Sister Justine gave seminars to us during some of our nightly recreation sessions”; “Sister Justine asked me to accompany her to one of GABRIELA’s rallies for women.”

THE MAKING OF A MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE MYTH

If the nuns I talked with universally agreed that Sister Justine played a critical role in encouraging their developing feminism, though, what are we to make of the sister’s seemingly legendary status? Without minimizing Sister Justine’s actual influence, it is important to consider the probability that she is as much a modern-day myth as a woman. While my interviewees spoke of Sister Justine on separate occasions during private sessions, hopefully permitting some freedom from concerns about congregational watchdogs, our discussions hardly afforded me access to unadulterated truth. I do not suspect anyone of lying to me—these were women committed to honesty by virtue of their faith—but it remains important to take account of the ways in which community ideologies can influence member understandings. In other words, the consistency with which the nuns credited Sister Justine for sparking their interest in women’s issues may reflect a priory mythos concerning the sister’s role as much as anything else.

Nor should it be forgotten that we are talking about interview sessions here. My informants’ narratives cannot be divorced from their presumed intentions to present themselves to me in a positive light, particularly given their knowledge that I was writing about them—an endeavor extending their potential audience far beyond the relative privacy of our daily interactions, as they all knew.¹ Moreover, the nuns knew I was interested specifically in investigating gender within the context of their own lives, religion, and nationality. Likewise, my interviewees were cognizant of my affiliation with the IWS. And, while I never explicitly identified myself as feminist unless asked, most of my interviewees simply presumed me such.

On the positive side, this meant they weren't shy about expressing their feminist opinions around me, much less about criticizing sexism in the Church, Philippine society, and even their own families. On the other hand, this may have rendered the nuns less likely to openly acknowledge possible reservations about policies implemented by the congregation—and Sister Justine—to forward a feminist agenda. At least some of my informants appeared a bit insecure talking with me about Filipina feminism on a more theoretical level, too. When I asked about gender dynamics in the Philippines, the usually effusive Sister Micha, for example, surprised me by repeatedly protesting that she wasn't an expert but was "new at it." And she was not the only one to respond this way to such queries: on the relatively rare occasions when I directly questioned my interviewees about their understandings of Filipina womanhood, most prefaced their answers with warnings that they were just learning about "all this" and that I should really be talking with Sister Justine.

Sister Justine herself, in contrast, appeared quite comfortable identifying herself as an expert on gender, displaying significant confidence in her ability to talk with other feminists about feminism. Moreover, she appeared quite comfortable openly discussing her public role as a political activist. Indeed, she told me that she had been reprimanded for her radicalism by the Manila archbishop, thereby effectively underscoring the point that she has made herself very much a rabble-rouser with respect to a politics far left of the official Catholic Church. She talked with evident pride of a European scholar working on a thesis about her, too, and she presents herself as having held primary responsibility not only for establishing the first center for women's studies in the Philippines but also for cofounding both what she claims to have been the first explicitly Philippine feminist organization, Pilipina, and a well-known umbrella feminist collective, GABRIELA.

In addition, biographers like Almanzor emphasize the sister's self-confidence and readiness to take on leadership positions, characterizing Sister Justine as "committed to blazing new trails and breaking new ground. . . . [The sister] says, 'All through life, I always wanted to do something new, something different.' . . . She has charisma, a pleasing personality and an engaging ability to make people work together" (Almanzor 1990, 340). Nor are descriptions intended to be anything but laudatory. Nonetheless, Sister Justine's ambitions and self-assurance alike notably contrast with both traditional cultural understandings of appropriate womanhood and traditional Church conceptions of appropriate sisterhood. This is not to say that other Filipinas haven't success-

fully managed very public political roles (Imelda Marcos and Cory Aquino most immediately come to mind), but most Philippine women in such positions acquire their power through politically powerful men or family dynasties with which they are associated. In an admittedly clichéd and overly generalized sense, although it is considered appropriate for women like Imelda and Cory to get involved in their husbands' work, it is considered much less appropriate for single women outside the bounds of familial protection and endorsement to agitate for potentially unpopular causes. While male Popes, priests, and bishops are expected to communicate God's will to the public, then, modesty of both demeanor and character is more typically expected of sisters.²

Most of my informants were modest about their work, too, if not about their opinions and desires. Sister Mary Peter neglected to mention that she was the subprioress until our fourth or fifth otherwise intensive and intimate interview; Sister Virginia constantly played down the significance of her role as vocation directress; Sister Josephine worried at length about whether or not she was a good enough teacher; Sister Micha fretted about the possibility that people might not like her. Sister Justine's readiness to place herself in the public eye and take individual responsibility for her feminist activities and opinions, in contrast, has doubtless not only effectively forwarded her activist agenda but also rendered her a particularly likely candidate for mythologization on the part of the larger congregation. Her willingness to openly advocate radical gender reform has presumably contributed to the growth of Benedictine tales concerning the primacy of her feminist initiative, irrespective of the actualities of the other sisters' involvement in their congregation's radicalization. What's more, the fact that she has been featured in at least two collections about "extraordinary" women in the Philippines (Almanzor 1990; Ancheta-Sabilano 1995) testifies to the extent to which she has already become a legend. In fact, with repetition, her biography has become a rather slick narrative of critical moments of revelation and action; it not only carries clear inspirational potential, but is also highly self-conscious, patterned, and formalized.

A CULTURAL CATALYST

On the other hand, while it would clearly be a mistake to search for the histories of social movements in the mythologized histories of their most vocal and visible members alone, it would also be a mistake to ignore the role particularly charismatic and inspired individuals play in

the genesis of such movements. Certain cultural and environmental conditions—of crisis or even of long-repressed dissatisfaction—undeniably lend themselves to rebellion or revolution. Yet in the absence of some sort of compelling incitement to change, serious transformational challenges to the status quo may simply never gain much footing. In short, the impetus of either particularly motivated leaders or collective moments of trauma may well be necessary to catalyze the reconfiguration of traditional patterns of thought and behavior on a socially significant level. And Sister Justine has arguably served as just such a cultural catalyst for the Missionary Benedictines. Although hardly the only feminist in the community, and although feminist partly precisely because of her training and experiences as a nun, the sister does appear to have been largely responsible for the adoption of larger congregation policies mandating a concern for women's rights in the 1980s.

Nor should Sister Justine's readiness to assume an unpopular stance in pressing for the revision of Philippine gender norms be downplayed. Within the Philippine context, simply identifying as feminist and explicitly promoting feminism represent potentially subversive activities in their own right. While *feminism* is in actuality an ambiguous, unstable, and variable tag, the term is loaded with negative connotations for many Filipinos. The popular image of the feminist in the Philippines is that of an aggressive, masculine, lesbian, and, again, Westernized woman harboring unreasonable hate for and resentment toward males. Although such characterizations obviously sorely misrepresent the real diversity of women and men who consider themselves feminist, such misconceptions—all highly threatening to existing ideologies of gender and sexuality in the Philippine context—continue to generate widespread social aversion to feminism. Indeed, Filipino wariness of feminism is arguably more a matter of insecurity about the perceived vulnerability of culturally entrenched conceptions of person, role, and family than a matter of actual objections to specific policy changes.

Simply by openly, unabashedly, embracing and defending feminism, then, Sister Justine already represents a challenge to traditional mass Philippine values. The example she is setting by proclaiming herself feminist might in fact be understood as constituting a form of rabble-rousing. And her radical rhetoric is all the more significant given the respect historically granted nuns as moral exemplars. As intimated earlier, Church affiliation renders revolutionary activity and the expression of what otherwise might be unpopular reformist ideologies more admissible in the Philippine context—one has only to think of the involvement of monastics in, for instance, the Philippine rebellion

against Spain, the People Power movement against the corrupt Marcos administration, and the formation of Basic Christian Communities in cooperation with the Philippine Communist Party. Again, the religious habit both affords Catholic sisters a certain freedom to engage in and lends an aura of legitimacy to what might normally be far more quickly socially prohibited political activity.

Indeed, nuns, in particular, are in a prime position to influence gender norms in the Philippines precisely because, to many Filipinos, religious sisterhood still represents traditional feminine virtue. As already noted, Catholic sisters are typically—almost stereotypically—imagined to be the best of wardens and role models alike for young Filipinas. Admittedly, such characterizations derive more from the circulation of stories about Catholic-school rigidity with respect to rules and regulations than any real comprehension of anything modern-day nuns do beyond praying and slapping students' wrists. On the other hand, the representation of nuns as rigorous guardians of female purity may well reflect the historical realities of more orthodox and more cloistered forms of convent life. Many of the older lay Catholic-educated Filipinas with whom I talked clearly recalled getting reprimanded by strict—and often foreign—sisters for speaking indigenous tongues in school or running late in rainy season floods or any number of other decidedly petty infractions.

Unfortunately, the very triviality of such disciplinary activity seems to have obscured any real understanding on the part of the general populace—and, quite probably, on the part of at least some of the disciplinarians themselves—of deeper congregational commitment to a moral mission. At the same time, however, such stereotyping seems to have been the very thing to convince Filipino parents that their daughters are in good hands at convent schools. Recalling Sister Placid's parents' rationale for sending her to SSC, the assumption here seems to be that nuns' supervision represents some sort of guarantee that girls will not date too early, get pregnant before marriage, or fail in some sense to maintain a ladylike decorum at all times, all in accord with the Marian virtues initially introduced into the archipelago by the Catholic Church itself.

Nor is the supposition that nuns are generally committed to their wards' welfare unfounded, notwithstanding widespread misconceptions concerning the nature of that commitment. Most monastics are deeply involved with questions of morality and integrity. More specifically, whatever disparities exist between current convent ideologies and parental/public understandings of femininity, the sisters running St. Scholastica's have always attempted to shape their pupils

according to their own, if not society's, conceptions of ideal womanhood. In the past—even the recent past, up until the 1960s and 1970s—this meant encouraging the skills and demeanor deemed appropriate to responsible wifedom and motherhood. Now, however, the Missionary Benedictines are educating their charges to be independent, self-confident, activist, and concerned with women's rights in the Philippine context—largely due to Sister Justine's influence. And, ironically, SSC's current efficacy in promoting such new possibilities for being Filipina may be at least partly due to a reputation built on previous conformity to cultural models of womanhood: the convent's past has garnered the trust of the Philippine elite, affording the now increasingly feminist Missionary Benedictines significant power.

FANNING THE FLAMES OF A FILIPINA FEMINISM

Before further considering the more tangible effects of Sister Justine's legacy as a catalyst for congregational change, however, we might do well to examine the previously mentioned (if, again, already highly mythologized) history of her interest in creating a feminism fit for the Philippines—an aspiration grounded in personal experiences of clear subjective and affective significance, if neither strictly determinative of nor necessary to such radicalization. Like many of my informants, she began her story with the national-crisis situation in the Philippines in the 1970s, during which time, she observed, she first became politicized. It all started with her "baptism of fire":

In 1975, [the] situation of crisis, oppression and injustice . . . made me respond to a telephone brigade asking nuns, seminarians and priests to come to the rescue of 600 striking workers from La Tondeña, a wine factory. It was the first attempted strike after the strike ban was issued following the declaration of Martial Law in September, 1972. . . . There I had my first encounter with military brutality and I experienced helplessness, having to face the reality of force and institutional violence. (Mananzan 1992, 64–65)

In other words, while convent life may have prepared Sister Justine for an activist career, the physical experience of oppression appears to have been important in catalyzing her commitment to social action outside the Church. Nor was the revelation short term; rather, it radi-

calized the sister in a more universal sense, both sensitizing her more generally to situations of exploitation and domination and rendering an activist response to such situations more imperative.

On the other hand, if critical to Sister Justine's biography as a form of baptism into social action, the sister's support of the La Tondeña strikers effectively meant recruitment into an already existing leftist/nationalist effort in the Philippines. In contrast, her involvement in Philippine feminism appears to have been more a matter of her own initiative. Sister Justine claims to have first gained real insight into women's rights issues when invited to a World Council of Churches-sponsored women's conference in Venice, during which she was assigned a paper on female political detainees. Significantly, the conference provided a relatively safe, personally (and nationally) non-threatening context within which she could begin exploring gender issues, first in terms of problems elsewhere, then as a matter of possible national concern:

I interviewed two women in [a] detention camp, and really I was so shocked by what they have experienced, you know, gang rape by the military, tortured. . . . I felt that, my goodness, why are they not crazy? You know, they should be crazy. . . . And when I gave the paper in Venice, I still had the political-activist point of view [that] this is military oppression . . . but then there also I listened to women talking about incest, about wife-beating. . . . Then I began to think, oh yes, but all these are in the Philippines too, you know, and the political prisoners had Amnesty International that documents everything, but who documents violence against women, you know, who makes a tribunal to try these violations of women's rights? So I thought, . . . when I come home I really have to do something about this.

For the first time, then, the sister began to reconsider traditional wisdom concerning the situation of women in the Philippines. Nor was this inconsequential. The republic is often represented as an egalitarian nation—a matter of pride for at least some Filipinos, who talk of how well educated Filipinas are, observe that Filipinas often control household finances, and heap praise upon Corazon Aquino as an example of Filipina political power. The myth of a matriarchal society is commonly invoked by Filipinos resistant to feminism, too, the argument being that there is no need for feminism in the Philippines because Filipinas are happy as is. In Venice, though, Sister Justine

appears to have realized that mythologizing the comparative power and privilege of Filipinas means obscuring the ways in which Philippine women are in fact exploited and subjugated by virtue of their gender.

The sister isn't alone in having benefited from such revelatory distance, either. The story of Sister Justine's feminist radicalization recalls the lives of nineteenth-century Filipino *ilustrados* (including José Rizal) inspired to work toward the possibility of an independent Philippine republic at least partly due to an education abroad in Western liberal thought.³ As creative agents of change, the *ilustrados* appropriated much of what they learned, applying it to their home situation as justification for a revolution against colonial Spain, just as Sister Justine began campaigning for reform in the Philippines, inspired by her experiences in Venice: "When I came home, that was in 1977 . . . I met three other women who felt the same way, so we started the first really manifestly feminist organization in the Philippines, . . . Pilipina."⁴ Unlike many Philippine women's organizations associated with and derived from leftist and nationalist groups, Pilipina was unique, according to Sister Justine, in identifying women's concerns as the primary focus rather than simply as a secondary issue. At the same time, Pilipina's efforts remained clearly situated within the Philippine context. The idea was not to map foreign forms of feminism onto the Philippines but rather to quite specifically attend to the sorts of difficulties Filipinas themselves face in the modern day. Sister Justine "believes that a feminist movement in the Third World must have a Third World orientation. She sees women's liberation as an essential aspect of total societal liberation . . . contextualized in the economic, political, and socio-cultural transformation of society" (Almanzor 1990, 348–49).

The sister has carried such concerns over into the General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Liberty, and Action (GABRIELA), too—a much better known Philippine feminist collective explicitly committed to the struggle against the "subordination, discrimination, and oppression of women as women" (Almanzor 1990, 345). The acronym was taken from a recently reclaimed nineteenth-century revolutionary heroine of the Spanish colonial era, signaling a desire to ground modern Filipina feminism in past Filipinas' resistance, contradicting the assumption that Third World feminism is necessarily rooted in First World feminism. And while Sister Justine emphasizes Pilipina's importance to the history of Philippine feminism, she is probably better known for her leadership of GABRIELA. She was elected GABRIELA's national chairperson in 1986 and 1987. Chairing the organization is no small thing, either: the position affords

considerable influence over the definition of the proper concerns of Philippine feminism as a whole. GABRIELA represents the largest coalition of feminists in the country, providing a forum for common action and discussion alike. Although a mere decade old, the collective boasted 420 member organizations, institutions, desks, and programs as of the mid-1990s, proclaiming itself “an alliance of women whose base can be found among grassroots women—peasants, workers, urban poor, indigenous women, fisherfolks, vendors—those who are the most oppressed and marginalized. Together with housewives, women students, religious and professionals, more than 50,000 women fall under [GABRIELA’s] mantle.”⁵ More specifically, the group opposes the Philippine sex trade, the mail-order-bride industry, and the abuse of female EPZ employees, while advocating for gender equity legislation, sexual-harassment laws, the formation of crisis centers for victims of rape and domestic violence, the establishment of day-care centers and primary health care projects for urban poor women, and education concerning the benefits of breast-feeding instead of baby formula.⁶

ENGENDERING A NEW MISSION THRUST

While Sister Justine’s involvement in Pilipina and GABRIELA has obvious public significance, however, the sister has also agitated for reform within the congregation, as intimated previously. Indeed, Sister Placid observed that the majority of the Missionary Benedictines are now expressly committed to women’s rights, and Sister Micha told me none of the newer sisters would outright condemn feminism because, given current congregational feeling, “it would look funny.” More tangible changes in structure and policy have been made, too. The convent formators now explicitly teach gender awareness to the postulants and novices, focusing on biblical women such as Judith, Esther, Ruth, and Deborah in their readings and taking entrants to seminars on women’s issues. In addition, the Missionary Benedictines are by now well versed in the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, using inclusive language. The nuns have also changed their Liturgy of Hours to make the language inclusive, with the sole exception of references to God as “Father.” Even here there was progress, however; Sister Placid informed me that many of the nuns no longer think of God as “he” but rather more as “yin and yang.” She now often says “she” in her own prayers—because, she explained, not only is “he” already in “she” but the femi-

nine seems more appropriate for the Creator given the female role in birthing.

Such changes have made inroads in the morning services offered at St. Scholastica's chapel, too. Early every Sunday, the well-guarded gates and the heavy church doors are thrown open to the public. And English-language missalettes, published by the Philippine Church as a guide to the Mass, are normally set for the taking atop a table underneath the holy water.⁷ Notably, the daily guides not only provide a means of distraction while waiting for the presiding father but also serve a critical and—if the speed with which they disappear can be taken as any indication—much appreciated role in the audience's experience of the services themselves. As I realized after watching a neighbor of mine murmuring in tandem with the priest even when the priest was supposed to be speaking alone, the missalettes afford participants an opportunity to follow along with, better comprehend, and practice English, thereby simultaneously gaining and displaying status.

If the use of English attracts a certain number of worshipers, however, I am primarily concerned here with the studied attention with which my fellow churchgoers perused their missalettes. Because many of the faithful read the publications in time with the speakers up front, many undoubtedly noticed occasions on which the spoken word clashed with the printed word. Certainly, *I* noticed—although no one ever pointed the matter out to me in explicit fashion. Whenever and wherever the missalettes read “he” or “him” or “fathers” or “brothers,” the oblates recruited by the Missionary Benedictines would invariably substitute “he and she” or “them” or “ancestors” or “brothers and sisters.” While the sisters couldn't do much about the attendant priests' homilies, they could and did go over the upcoming Sunday gospel readings with their liturgists every Friday or Saturday to insure the replacement of sex-biased terms with inclusive language.⁸ In fact, ironically, the very sexism of the Philippine Church's official publications has provided the sisters with a particularly effective means of raising their flock's awareness of the significance of their terminological choices. It was hard to overlook the discrepancies between the texts and the testimonials when reading along during Mass.⁹

The altar girls recruited by the nuns also represented a deviation from long-standing Catholic tradition. Prior to Vatican II, only boys were deemed suitable assistants to the priests; nor has there been much change in most Philippine Masses since. Of all the services I attended—and I patronized many different Manila chapels while in the field—the

ones organized by the Missionary Benedictines were the only ones at which I witnessed girls serving at the altar.

If unorthodox, though, SSC's services still attracted a good number of chapel regulars. The elderly man who habitually sat at the side by the back door, shuffling out to allow others in and rising and sitting before the rest of us in anticipation of all formal requests, seemed quite unperturbed by the girls at the altar. The lady in white with the traditional cloth over her graying hair and a faith strong enough to give her the shakes before communion didn't seem fazed by the addition of "sisters" to the "brothers" of the Gospel. The teenage boys wearing T-shirts and jeans and hiding in the back of the chapel, as if slightly embarrassed by their devotion, seemed accepting of the sisters' implicit critiques of biblical sexism. What's more, if constancy of attendance can be taken as an indication, most of the other worshipers must have been relatively satisfied with Mass at St. Scholastica's. Notwithstanding the proximity of another church within easy walking distance, the priory chapel was usually quite crowded on Sundays, enough so that I had to plan an early arrival in order to insure myself of a copy of one of the missalettes. To all appearances, in other words, SSC's services effectively provided a forum within which the public could be sensitized to gender without explicit preaching about that frightening and off-putting term, *feminism*.

ST. SCHOLASTICA'S COLLEGE

Institutional changes have been made within the college itself, too. As earlier noted, the Missionary Benedictines' schools haven't always forwarded feminist education. The first German sisters who came to the Philippines in the early 1900s in response to a call for religious assistance on the part of socially active congregations still adhered to rather essentialist assumptions about proper womanhood and instructed their young Filipina pupils in the Marian virtues in quite traditional fashion. In other words, they trained their students to be demure, to be passive, to defer to male authorities, to focus on social and domestic graces, to aspire to loving maternity, and to be good and faithful and forgiving spouses—in short, to define themselves in terms of smooth relationships with others rather than in terms of intellectual abilities or career ambitions in potential conflict with more proper familial commitments.

Things have changed a good deal since then, however; the Missionary Benedictine schools are now known within Philippine academic cir-

cles for their women's studies courses. In fact, a lay friend who taught at De La Salle University told me that, unlike most nuns, the Missionary Benedictines weren't sedate and conservative, and had given St. Scholastica's a reputation as a feminist stronghold. Another lay acquaintance observed that SSC was the place to send your daughter if you wanted her to be strong, self-confident, and socially aware.

And all of this is due, again, largely to Sister Justine's influence. As SSC's vice president and college dean in 1982, the sister began designing the school's women's studies program, purportedly the first such separate program in the Philippines. Furthermore, given the success of a pilot class organized in 1985 to test out an experimental curriculum compiled from recommendations made by local Filipina activists, introductory courses on gender issues have now been made a requirement for graduation. Interested students can also now pursue a cognate in women's studies focused on four core classes: *The Development of Women's Thoughts and Feminism*, *Gender Issues in Development and Modernization*, *Woman and Religion*, and *Current Issues on Women*.¹⁰

The college's women's studies instructors make efforts to combine classroom work and outside activity in their courses, too. Carmen, for instance, regularly assigns interviews with women workers; takes her students to women-focused concerts, poetry readings, and art exhibits; and ultimately asks her pupils to develop feminist agendas for either personal or group renewal. Moreover, she distributes the addresses and phone numbers of existing networks of Filipinas involved in social-reform efforts at the end of every term in hopes of encouraging at least some Scholasticans to pursue activist careers on behalf of women in the Philippines. Many of SSC's students are also taken on field trips to visit peasant or urban poor women who are organized and articulate about their problems. In addition, efforts are made to openly discuss female sexuality and biology: while SSC now accepts single mothers (and is the only Catholic school in the country to do so), Carmen explained, the sisters hardly want to see more teenage pregnancies due to ignorance about birth control.

THE INSTITUTE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

The Institute of Women's Studies, established in 1990, represents an important milestone, too, as both an educational and an activist foundation. Officially, the IWS is associated with but not in fact controlled by SSC: while SSC students and faculty are encouraged to take advan-

tage of its resources, it maintains links with other women's organizations, and many of the women it serves are outside academe. More specifically, the institute advertises a Curricular and Training Program encompassing the women's studies program at St. Scholastica's College, an Intercultural Course for Women and Society designed for women from Asia and the Pacific, and Trainor's Training for Filipina organization leaders and educators. In addition, the IWS offers short-term classes on gender and personal development, sponsors and publishes research on women, houses a small but wide-ranging library of women's studies books, and manages various outreach programs designed to publicize women's rights issues.¹¹

Moreover, the institute is now housed in a building named Nursia after the birthplace of the sibling saints Benedict and Scholastica in a rather suggestive symbolic statement concerning possible parallels between the original home of Benedictinism and its Manileño incarnation as a sort of nursery for the development of feminist Missionary Benedictinism in the present Philippine situation. Indeed, the name underscores the fact that Sister Justine's understanding of what she calls the "woman question" is intricately connected with her understanding of spirituality.¹² Likewise, Nursia's rather prominent stained-glass windows, bearing the Benedictine Pax, attest to the existence of some link beyond the mere financial or institutional between the convent mission and that of the IWS. After all, neither the name nor the pax nor much else about the building is accidental. Nursia is very much Sister Justine's conscious creation: she designed it and decorated it in lavender and showed me around with much the same enthusiasm one might expect of a stereotypical Filipina housewife showing off her home.

Nursia's uniqueness does not reside in the purple hue of its furnishings alone, however. I spent my first month in Manila substituting for the center's librarian (a simple matter of shelving books and insuring that those taken out were returned, with proper ID requisitioned as a guarantee). And the library notably contrasts with other Philippine academic libraries—St. Scholastica's college library, the library at De La Salle University down the road, and the libraries at the University of the Philippines and at Ateneo de Manila. For one thing, it is small, and comfortably homey because of it. But, more importantly, with the exception of those used by the librarian herself, it is not a library full of desks and straight-backed wooden chairs designed to force occupants to pay attention to their work on the debatable assumption that physical discomfort somehow facilitates research. Rather, it is a casual place in which to quite literally kick off one's shoes and put up one's feet.

Extra *tsinelas* are stacked on a rack to one side for persons unwilling to remain barefoot or sock-footed after obeying the sign on the door requesting, in friendly fashion, the removal of more traditional footwear—a not insignificantly dehierarchizing request in a country in which *tsinelas*, the typical choice of the poor, are widely considered inappropriate in public (and thus in school) and of which the infamously well-heeled Imelda Marcos served as longtime first lady. Browsing and reading in the room are encouraged by the big handwoven red, purple, and black cushions spread about for comfortable seating, too, as well as the low wooden fold-up lap desks available for those desirous of a hard writing surface. A fan and rarely used air conditioner complete the picture—along with large windows allowing light in from the back wall and glass panes allowing smiles across the way to the IWS waiting room.

Nor is this sort of relaxed design in an official institutional context common in the Philippines, as Sister Justine is well aware. Nursia represents a deliberate alternative to the highly formalized sort of learning environment typified by Philippine academies, including St. Scholastica's College. St. Scholastica's teachers still command authority in somewhat military fashion, as students stand up before answering; rise when spoken to; always address their teachers as "Sister," "Ma'am," or "Sir"; dutifully recite prayers before and after class; and, perhaps most startling to someone from an American liberal arts tradition such as myself, rarely argue or question their instructors beyond pleading an inability to do an assignment for some good reason. Moreover, SSC's classrooms feature hard floors, stark walls, and chair-desk combinations that tend to make for sore rear ends, all designed to discipline the student body in a very physical sense.

Nursia's library, in contrast, appears designed not only to encourage physical comfort but also to encourage the exploration of new understandings of physicality. As observed earlier, women in the Philippines are very much judged in terms of their appearance. Although many women, particularly those in the lower classes and those going about everyday neighborhood business, do not dress up within the *barangay* setting, women are generally expected to be ladylike in demeanor. But Nursia affords an alternative to such culturally dictated and highly gendered body consciousness.¹³ Here, a certain degree of distance from expectations of womanhood, both corporeal and otherwise, can be attained; here, female bodies are given space within which to relax while female minds are encouraged to reconfigure prior conceptions of personal possibility, challenging previously maintained assumptions

about what being a woman means or should mean. The deemphasis on bodily propriety in the library complements the surroundings—the shelves of books analyzing how gender and womanhood are understood and differently valued and enacted within the Philippines. Some of these works are about female corporeality, too: the IWS collection includes texts about traditionally taboo issues of female sexuality, written not only from a conservative Catholic perspective, but also from lesbian, prochoice, and pro–birth control perspectives. Such books are radical within the very devoutly Catholic Philippine context; the fact that they form part of Nursia’s environment, in concert with the cushions and *tsinelas* and lavender decorations, goes far, I think, in explaining how the building might well indeed represent a place within which women can reconceive themselves as whole persons in the image of God, recalling St. Benedict’s birthplace with a definitely modern twist.

It is also notable that Nursia exists outside the walls of St. Scholastica proper. Admittedly, it is close—just out the main gate, down the street, and across to the other side. But it still isn’t within the complex. And this makes a difference in several ways. While its location may render IWS facilities and resources less accessible to lazier or more harried college students and faculty, it also marks an arguably radical distance from SSC, rendering the experimental character of the place more possible because not physically encompassed by an already rigidly disciplined environment. Moreover, Nursia’s very marginality vis-à-vis the college proper at least theoretically renders it more accessible to others. After all, as previously discussed, the college walls very concretely serve to maintain societal barriers between the relatively privileged few allowed inside and those lacking the requisite shoes, identification, and reason to pass the guards at the gates. Nursia, in contrast, is intended as a public facility open to all who wish to enter. True, the building looks a bit foreboding from the street perspective. Its lack of welcome signs, much less a clear proclamation of identity and intent may make it appear unapproachable to those not in the know. Its three stories of comparative orderliness stand out from the more mundane fuss of the street homes—bare feet might be allowed in, but what completely shoeless bare feet would make the attempt? Nevertheless, despite perhaps unrecognized problems of self-selection (or deselection) on the part of women normally denied entry to such official looking buildings, it is significant that no guard watches Nursia’s gate during the daylight hours—there is only a heavy door, a doorbell, and a wait for one of the employees to answer the call. In theory at least, anyone can walk in, a notable departure from the college’s stricter monitoring and an appar-

ent corrective to a congregational history of service primarily to privileged Filipinos.

It is significant, too, that the institute directs many of its recruitment efforts, such as they are, toward women outside of St. Scholastica's—women in labor groups, women living in urban poverty, women desirous of organizing other women. In other words, while nominally and legally associated with an exclusive educational institution, the IWS represents, to some extent, an attempt to offer education—specifically about gender issues, with a particular leftist political slant—to persons deprived of such opportunities in the ordinary course of life. The institute signifies the potential, at least, to bridge gaps between the well-educated elite and the undereducated poor. Here, efforts are made to further communication across diversity, marking a broadening of the congregation's mission with a new consciousness of the need to serve and be in solidarity with the underprivileged. Indeed, Carmen told me that she considers the IWS particularly important precisely because, while still associated with SSC, it takes women's studies outside the academy and into the community. What's more, recall, Sister Placid sees Nursia as a model for the Subiaco she envisions exactly for this reason.

MAKING FEMINISM AN EVERYDAY EVENT

Of course, the IWS also serves as an important facility for the sisters themselves, Sister Placid, a two-year member of IWS board of trustees, explicitly identified Nursia as a critical resource for the congregation. Many of the sisters not only take classes at Nursia, she observed, but also regularly attend IWS functions such as the final presentation of 1994's fall Trainor's Training class, where revised feminist fairy tales were enacted before the board of directors. And the insights gained on such occasions are shared with those who can't make it in person, whether privately or during communal recreation.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume the Missionary Benedictines' feminist radicalization a function of Sister Justine's efforts and Nursia's existence alone. My informants are embracing feminism not as passive imitators but because Sister Justine's arguments make sense in light of their own prior concerns and experiences. And they are enacting their feminism through everyday, small-scale, local intervention just as effectively as Sister Justine engages in more visible public political action.

For example, Sister Josephine told me her Trainor's Training has made a big difference in helping her speak up, particularly in the face of sexist comments:

Some of my friends after I took the course would say, "You have become very aggressive." I would say, "I beg your pardon. No, I'm just more assertive. Because I'm a woman, before I just let you [say what you wanted]." They would say, "Now you really fight." . . . Especially my priest friends who are very vocal would tell me I'm very aggressive. No, I'm assertive—something new to them. . . . Before I would just let them be. I wouldn't talk. I said, "No more."

If the sister's male friends are threatened by her new assertiveness, however, many of her female compatriots appear to have found it inspiring: "The women I think like it, actually. . . . Two or three of my friends told me some of my students or some of my friends have more or less adopted, copied, how I would relate or how I would deal with people, how I talk. 'You're kidding,' I said. . . . Anyway, it's highest time. The Philippines are very, very, patriarchal."

Nor is Sister Josephine's popularity surprising. As intimated earlier, the sisters are in a prime position to serve as role models for women in the Philippines by virtue of their profession. Although religious sisterhood may not be a profession of parental choice, the fact that nuns are generally deemed moral exemplars in Philippine society renders them both particularly apt to be idolized, and—again—free to be more openly opinionated and politically active than might otherwise be possible. Indeed, many of my informants, including Sister Justine and Sister Placid, spoke of nuns who had inspired them when young as paragons of humanity and intelligence. In and of their very persons, then, the Missionary Benedictines are conveying the message that standing fast by personal principles rather than bowing down to male authority is both possible and even morally admirable in women, however suspect others may find such behavior.

TALKING GENDER IN THE CLASSROOM

If speaking out in the first place was already an arguably feminist act for Sister Josephine, however, she was also committed to more explicitly educating her students, their parents, and other teachers about women's issues. In Mindanao, for example, she introduced the instruc-

tors she supervised to gender analysis, and during a rotation as the principal of an all-girl high school she invited a local feminist activist to speak with the seniors:

They were irritated, they were angry, and they realized, ah, this is what the boys do to us! . . . You could just say that in a class of forty, there are only five of them who are not for it, but the rest are for it. When I saw that the fourth-year high school [students] were OK . . . I gave it to third-year. And then . . . I gave it to the first-year students. [The activist showed them] cartoons so they could see what a woman does from the beginning from the time she wakes up to the time that she sleeps. . . . It's really the girl and the mother who are working so hard all the time. So that's the starter. And they exchange [ideas], and there's a little input. Three hours. And they asked for it again. . . . When I found out, I gave it to the teachers.

Moreover, in Bacolod, the sister herself chaired two seminars on women and religion at De La Salle University, both of which she felt had been successful. One of the women in attendance had questioned Christ's choice of only male apostles, for example. So they discussed it, and came up with the answer that it was simply a matter of the conditions of the time—not an indication that men are somehow more godly. After all, one only had to think of Mary Magdalene, who kept faith when none of the apostles did, Sister Josephine observed. Christ recognized the spirituality of such women, she assured me; Christ himself was egalitarian, and Catholicism's patriarchal structure mere historical circumstance.

Indeed, the sister further emphasized this point during the theology courses she taught at SSC. Following the requisite prayer one morning, for example, she asked everyone to team up and devise versions of the Apostles' Creed, this being the "heart of the Catholic faith." In general, the outcome was predictable, too; pretty much everyone mentioned love, justice, and equality. Nor was Sister Josephine unhappy with these results, all representing values she had been emphasizing throughout the course. But something was missing, she said. Heads turned in confusion: most groups had followed the original fairly closely; what could they have missed, and would it affect their grades? "Well," the sister explained, "None of you mentioned sisters as well as brothers or included women." We were all women here; we should think about it.

Mankind—how about womankind, too, or simply humanity? At least, she whispered to me afterward, one of her other class teams had actually incorporated a feminist sensibility into their statement of convictions, referring to themselves as the “daughters of God,” for example, instead of using noninclusive language that all too ironically would cut them out of what was supposed to be a personal statement of belief. She had already shown their creed to the rest of the sisters, who were happy about it—although it was a pity they represented only one of thirty teams in total.

That wasn’t the end of the lesson, however. Sister Josephine went on to encourage us all to be more conscious of our rights and choices as women. Each one of us was a whole human being, she said, and we should not be fooled into thinking our bodies distinct from our souls. God loved all of us unconditionally, whether male or female. And each of us had a mandate from God to try to build a better world, beginning in the Philippines. This meant looking at gender, too. Many Philippine men were spoiled and allowed to get away with more than women, even when it came to religion. Her brothers had been allowed to skip Mass or to stand outside the door during the homily and smoke cigarettes and talk, for example, while she and her sisters were expected to regularly attend church services, sitting inside quietly even when they had Sunday duties at home.

What’s more, such double standards were particularly disturbing given the fact that Roman Catholicism acknowledges only male fitness for the priesthood. Women, Sister Josephine observed, can preach, baptize, and anoint the sick, but only priests—and thus only men—can currently serve as celebrants at Mass, confessors, or officiators at the sacrament of matrimony. This made it hard for the sisters, too. They often had difficulty finding priests for their liturgies, particularly on short notice, such as when they rather suddenly decided to hold a Thanksgiving Eucharist for World Youth Day. In the absence of suitable celebrants on such occasions, the Missionary Benedictines had to resort to “dry Masses” without the consecration. In fact, most female religious congregations keep already consecrated hosts on hand in the event of such crises. There was no guarantee of satisfaction even when priests were found to preside over their services, either. The fathers who came were sometimes objectionable, preaching hellfire and brimstone or espousing conservative views antithetical to congregation values. So why weren’t there female priests?

“Because of Jesus Christ,” responded one of the students, confident

in her answer. But Sister Josephine countered that there was nothing about this in the Bible. “Tradition?” the girl tried again. “OK,” the sister replied, “but why can’t tradition change?” Personally, she thought the time was coming—not for a while maybe, perhaps not in her lifetime, but in the future—when the Church would ordain women as priests. If Catholicism was to survive in the modern world, it would probably be necessary to grant women and men equal spiritual authority within the Church hierarchy, however radical this suggestion was within the Philippine context.¹⁴ After all, men weren’t such perfect examples of priesthood. Filipino men—even priests, the sister noted—could often get away with “extracurricular activities,” while women were supposed to remain faithful. In the Philippines, priests often aren’t as good about keeping their vows to celibacy as nuns; many priests enact their fatherhood in an all too literal sense. In fact, Sister Josephine said, her *lola* converted to the Iglesia ni Kristo two years before her death because scandalized at the discovery that her longtime Catholic priest had had children.

The sister wasn’t just gossiping, either. For Sister Josephine, the classroom represents an arena within which students can be encouraged to begin rethinking Catholic orthodoxy in general and the gendering of Catholicism in particular. As she put it, “I told myself I could do something here . . . in my classes. . . . I could put in something about women studies. . . . I introduce it the way I do my classes and my lessons.” Indeed, she claimed to prefer teaching to administrative work precisely because, as a teacher, she could get closer to and thus have more of an impact on Philippine youth. Such small-scale intervention was more satisfactory, for her, than organizational work at a higher level and, while most of her students doubtless forgot her remarks as soon as the end bell rang, the very incidence of even one team in thirty attentive to inclusive language in its creed testifies to the efficacy of her efforts.

BRINGING FEMINISM INTO THE MASS MOVEMENTS

Likewise, Sister Placid made efforts to incorporate her feminism into her work—in this case with the already politicized but nevertheless arguably sexist Philippine Left. Notwithstanding their radicalism, she observed that many Filipinos involved in nationalist organizing remain blind to gender inequities:

In the mass movements, even among the most radical organizations, where I found a lot that is praiseworthy . . . the woman question is very much neglected. And you will find people who are radicals, who want to work for a social transformation that strikes at the social problem at the roots, and yet there are many males who are oppressive of the females, and they don't even know it. And women also who don't even know it that they're in an oppressed position. . . . For example, just last week I was listening to two political activists from the 1970s . . . two people I admire very much—I mean, who are really serious revolutionaries. And yet just watching them discuss—these are husband and wife—watching them discuss their daughter, also a political activist, who married before she reached . . . legal adulthood. . . . Both did not want her to get married this early, but the mother was much more accepting, because this is her daughter's decision. . . . Even with regard to what you should do for the couple, what we should advise them, how we should help them for their own responsible nurturing of their own relationship—that was the mother's position. And her husband was talking only about “should should should ought ought ought.” And then the woman says, “I don't want her to go through what I have gone through,” and she was saying a lot. And then the man was saying, “No, you shouldn't think of not going through what you went through—you should always be able to look back and learn from your experience.” You see, he was teaching, but that was not what the woman was saying. . . . They kept going back and forth, and he couldn't see what she really meant. And he was all the time lecturing, lecturing. And she was discussing.

The point, of course, is that the man in question was attempting to impose his own moral system on both his wife and daughter rather than listening to their needs, desires, and understandings of the situation. And his failure to recognize his daughter's decision-making abilities, much less respond to her life choices in a positive and supportive yet advisory and cautionary manner, was typical, in Sister Placid's opinion, of Filipino male attitudes toward women—patronizing, protective, judgmental, and prohibitive of female independence and integrity. Likewise, his refusal to acknowledge his wife's assertion that she did not want their daughter to go through what she had gone through was problematic. As an expression of personal feeling, the statement was not open to question: his wife was simply indexing the fact that it had been difficult for her to deal with a recalcitrant father herself, Sister

Placid explained. Yet although lacking any immediate experiential knowledge of what it might mean to be a woman (and a woman subject to male authority, including rigid paternal authority), he did not even think to ask what exactly she meant. Notwithstanding his commitment to helping the Philippine poor gain a voice in the government, he was too invested in his paternity to hear what his wife and daughter were trying to say. Although well aware of the systems of power and privilege silencing and subjugating his working-class compatriots, he was unable to recognize the ways in which he was using his own positional power and privilege within the household to silence and subjugate women he undoubtedly loved very much.

Sister Placid talked of her experiences on a committee overseeing another case concerning a couple active in the mass movements, too. While the man at issue in this instance was clearly both a womanizer and a batterer, and his wife had already pursued legal separation four times because of it, he seemed to have a hold over her. Just as the proceedings were nearing completion, he yet again persuaded his wife to return to him. Despite her independent political involvement and obvious capability as the head of a major leftist organization, she simply didn't seem to believe herself able to make it without him—notwithstanding Sister Placid's efforts to bolster her self-confidence.

It wasn't just that there were problematic gender dynamics operating in many of the marriages the sister came across in her work with the mass movements, though. Her compatriots also often made sexist remarks. For example, she'd been on a central administrative committee responsible for mapping out a six-month regional plan of action. Among other things, the group had decided to arrange a demonstration in celebration of International Women's Day. This itself, of course, was a good thing—but part of the planning process entailed determining a possible course of action in the case of police harassment. Usually, when confronted by the military in the such situations, especially when the military is armed, rally leaders issue the command "Dapa" to get everyone on the ground. This time, however, one of the men suggested that the leaders instead shout "Hilata," which essentially translates as "lie down in a seductive pose." If the women in front did this, he joked, the soldiers would be distracted and the demonstrators would be safe.

But he was wrong: that would hardly be safe for the women! The joke indexed a failure to respect their capacity to contribute to the struggle in ways other than as sexual decoys, too—a suggestion demeaning to their intelligence. And the reference to such battle tactics was a perversion of Ifugao culture. Traditionally, Ifugao women would raise their

skirts to expose themselves as a signal to war, the idea being that no one would be allowed to survive such a forbidden sight. The act signified the intent to kill, a threat taken very seriously by enemies. In this case, however, the use of women's bodies was essentially being suggested as a disposable means of protecting the men involved from harm. So, after the laughter died down, Sister Placid spoke up, "Is this how you men think of the women?" The men had all immediately apologized, but there was clearly a need for greater sensitivity to gender issues within the mass movements, and she, for one, was determined to do her best to bring the woman question to the forefront in such situations.

POLITICIZING THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Likewise, Sister Micha said she made efforts to discuss problematic gender dynamics whenever necessary, whatever her duties. She felt she herself made the most difference as a counselor, too. People often sought her out for informal guidance, she confessed, as people often do with sisters—"That's what we are for!" For example, a woman had recently come to Sister Micha in frustration about a married man who wanted her for his *querida*. She said she didn't want to be his girl, but she was having trouble saying no, which, Sister Micha added, was something very Filipina, and something many Filipino men take advantage of. Women in the Philippines, she explained, are trained to be subservient and to measure their value in terms of male attention, so much so that the woman felt pressured to succumb to her suitor not only despite her own wishes but also despite strong cultural and religious pressures to remain virginal.¹⁵ It's a double bind for Filipinas, the sister added: if a man sexually harasses or rapes you, it is your own fault. If you lose your virginity, you are the sinner. Yet you are supposed to look up to men as patrons, protectors, and advisers. In this case, however, Sister Micha strongly encouraged the woman to stand up for herself, emphasizing her personal rights and telling her to let the man know she'd told a nun about him.

Likewise, the sister had done her best to dissuade another woman from marrying against her will. The woman was pregnant, though, and, as a good Catholic, she felt morally obliged to make her child legitimate and her loss of virginity admissible by marrying the baby's father. That wasn't all, either. At length, she had confided to Sister Micha that she had actually been raped by her suitor, although she perversely believed herself somehow at fault for it. It had happened at a party;

she'd been introduced to him, he'd given her what must have been a drugged drink, and the next thing she knew, she was lying flat on her back with her skirt up and her hymen broken. What's more, she now thought herself too polluted for anyone else, while he thought himself entitled to sleep with her whenever desirous of doing so.

So Sister Micha spent a good deal of time talking about rape in an attempt to get the woman to stop blaming herself for the incident and to start taking control of her own life. The sister thought she had been able to convince her not to let people force her to do things she didn't want to do, too. But it was sad that Philippine culture was so backward when it came to female sexuality. Sister Micha admitted that she could understand all too well why her advisee would fault herself for such sexual violation, as rape wasn't really widely considered a crime in the absence of strong evidence of a struggle. Too many people were responding to recent media reports about a woman raped in the hills by condemning her for having worn shorts that were too short, for example. Indeed, in the Philippines, rape has only recently begun to be recognized and prosecuted as a serious form of physical assault, its longtime failure to be understood as such evidenced by a newspaper article detailing famous actresses' answers to the outlandish question, "Who would you choose as your rapist?" The respondents replied as if simply asked who they'd want to sleep with, obscuring the violent and coercive nature of rape and underlining the extent to which rape and heterosexual intercourse are conflated in Filipino society.

Mainstream, urban, middle-class Filipino attitudes toward female sexuality could make for other difficulties, too, Sister Micha observed. While in Negros, she had been approached by a novice from another congregation, then on leave. The woman confessed that she had begun to masturbate when she was five years old. "Yes, so . . . ?" the sister had replied. Personally, she told me, she was inclined to be liberal about such things. But she understood the woman's shame; she herself remembered having been told by the nuns in charge of her schooling to be very careful washing "down there." It wasn't supposed to be pleasurable to touch oneself; in fact, Filipino Catholics still widely claim that masturbation is a personality disorder, and female masturbation, in particular—inescapably indexing the reality of female sexual desire—should not happen according to popular Philippine moral belief.

Given the prevalence of such attitudes, Sister Micha thought that telling the novice that touching herself was OK would only confuse the woman. So the sister suggested she try to avoid masturbating, not

because it was bad but because it made her feel badly about herself. The woman couldn't stop, though. And when the sister tried to get the novice to think about why she felt compelled to masturbate, it became clear that she did it as a form of self-abasement. She masturbated when unhappy with herself, and it reaffirmed her feelings of inadequacy and sinfulness. In the end, then, the woman's real problem wasn't masturbating as such but a lack of self-esteem, a point Sister Micha discussed at length with her.

The rigidity of Filipino Catholic conceptions of appropriate and admissible sexuality also makes same-sex desire difficult to manage, of course. Indeed, a lesbian friend of the sister's had approached her in consternation over just this issue. Although on the rebound from a "devastating" experience with a prior partner, she had found a new companion, a female doctor whom she'd invited to move in. But Sister Micha's friend was worried that they would be committing a sin in sleeping together. So Sister Micha had asked, "If I tell you it's a sin, will you stop doing it?" "No," her friend answered. And that, the sister told me, meant there was really no point in spouting Catholic dogma. She had said as much, too—why call it a sin when calling it a sin wasn't going to have any positive effects? She was only really concerned about their respective motivations: she wanted to make sure they weren't going to exploit or hurt one another.

Because a nun, though, people often imagined she would agree with the Pope and Cardinal Sin. Indeed, one of the lay school administrators had once asked how the sister could reconcile her beliefs with being Missionary Benedictine—how could she say things contradicting John Paul II? It could be difficult to get past such expectations; lengthy explanations were often required in order to clarify her position when at odds with church dogma, and she couldn't always express her true opinions outright. For instance, talking about condom use was tricky. Her students were apt to be scandalized at the thought that a sister might consider condoms admissible, the shock obscuring the substance of her views. So, in class, she would usually tackle the issue in class in the context of a historical exploration of the church's attitudes toward contraceptives in order to push home the point that current prohibitions derive from human theological hang-ups, not from God. After all, how could a piece of plastic be inherently sinful, no matter what its use? What's more, how natural was the "natural" family planning method when female sexual desire is often at its height during those times of greatest female fertility?

THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY

Sister Micha's willingness to challenge popular assumptions about Catholicism as a visibly professed monastic is significant not only in underlining the point that Catholic practice is not the same as church dogma, then, but also as an effective means of engendering cultural change with respect to issues of sexual morality in particular. Again, a good deal of the cultural guilt produced around the issue of female sexuality in the Philippines is due to the influence of the Catholic Church, which has defined sexuality as a matter of moral concern instead of simply social or personal concern. If the women Sister Micha was counseling were somewhat ironically seeking solace at the symbolic source of their pain, she was indeed in a position to help, rendering the church a site of radicalization as well as oppression through the revision of relevant cultural scripts.

But Sister Micha's counseling and mentoring work also highlight the importance of local-level action on the most intimate scale. Perhaps because so much guilt and shame surround female sexuality in the Philippines, Philippine feminist organizations have tended to ignore the sorts of problems indexed above. While many Filipina feminists talk at length in public about related issues such as prostitution, the mail-order-bride industry, and beauty contests, much less attention has been granted incest, rape, homophobia, and even birth control methods. Such topics are not readily amenable to public action given a cultural reluctance to even recognize sexual aggression as problematic and given the degree to which limitations placed on women's control of their own bodies are taken for granted.¹⁶ Thus, Sister Micha's private consultations represent a significant form of feminist action where large-scale political or legal intervention is unlikely anytime soon.

Such local-level work has other advantages, too. When I asked Sister Micha if she had ever run into trouble because of her unorthodox views, she told me that she "wasn't important enough" to cause a stir, unlike Sister Justine. But it is precisely because Sister Micha, Sister Placid, and Sister Josephine are insignificant from a larger institutional perspective that they have been able to take advantage of opportunities for subversive action outside the reach of disciplinary policing. While making a public outcry can certainly go a long way to effecting cultural change, the possibilities inherent in working to empower women in subtle ways from the margins should not be ignored.

After all, even the most spontaneous, private, seemingly minor everyday activity may be as critical to social reform as planned, public,

large-scale feminist activity. Both sorts of what is in fact a rather arbitrary descriptive distinction between possible behavioral modes are doubtless necessary to real cultural transformation: the difference between the two simply resides in style and scale. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the individual, meaningful interactions with respected figures may have greater impact and may lead to more permanent behavioral changes than more generalized participation within or contact with large political movements. Indeed, Missionary Benedictines such as Sister Josephine, Sister Placid, and Sister Micha may have greater political influence in many situations precisely because opportunistically acting on a local and situationally contingent level rather than acting as representatives of particular group interests. While explicitly identifying as feminist remains controversial and even suspicious within the Philippines, simply speaking as a sister in this or that setting is less likely to evoke such defensive reactions and is therefore perhaps more likely to make a difference.

That aside, it is also important to recognize the ways in which the sisters' feminism relates to the broader picture, as one aspect of my informants' more general congregational and personal politics. While the congregation's constitution explicitly designates empowering women part of the Missionary Benedictine mission thrust, the document also specifically mandates solidarity with the poor and a commitment to ecologically friendly practices. No single one of these political and religious concerns is primary, although individual sisters have focused their efforts on particular aspects of the congregation's mission. All of my informants indexed a commitment to acting on behalf of all disempowered groups wherever and whenever possible, regardless of the specific nature of their assignments. In short, the nuns understand their mission as a generalized religious imperative to serve as advocates for the underprivileged and exploited. Their faith underlies their determination and dedication as radical agents of both feminist reform and other forms of culture change, a point I will take up in greater depth in the following chapter.

Filipina Feminism(s) Revisited

While I have discussed many of the ways in which the Missionary Benedictines might be termed *feminist* in previous chapters, we might further inquire into the broader implications of the sisters' practices with respect to Philippine feminism, Third World feminism, and feminist theory in general. Feminism has long represented a contested domain. Most feminists, I think, would argue that both an understanding of the ways in which gender systems operate and a commitment to the radical transformation of practices and ideologies silencing and subordinating women are integral to their projects. However, it is not always easy to get a clear picture of the mechanisms of oppression. We all confront and live within larger cultural systems wherein particular partially integrated and partially contradictory gender configurations are continually reproduced at multiple, potentially unassimilable, sites, both material and psychological. The analysis of gender is especially complicated insofar as gender cannot be separated from other socially significant axes of relationship or criteria of placement, however much academics may attempt to effect such a separation for purposes of clarification. Rather, gender (as both process and product) is always necessarily inflected by race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, creed, and so on, though the ways in which such fluid features of personhood are foregrounded in specific contexts are likely to differ markedly. In short, although generalizations about gender oppression can be useful, such generalizations must be grounded in a recognition that every woman is different. Some of these differences matter very much on an experiential and political level, and, critically, some of these differences arise from a power differential whereby some women are privileged over and complicit in the oppression of others by race or class or nationality, for instance (Carby 1982; hooks 1990; Spivak 1987; Trinh 1989). Solidarity can therefore only really be maintained to the extent that it is inclu-

sive, nonessentialist, and founded on mutual respect and multivocality rather than co-optation.

The experiences of Third World women thus provide a crucial counterpoint to Western ethnocentrism. Indeed, my own work on modern-day Filipina feminist nuns has in large part been directed toward this end as an intellectual but also necessarily political enterprise. My field experiences serve in part to complicate current work on both Philippine and Third World feminism. Unfortunately, little literature about feminism in the Philippines is widely available outside of the archipelago; much of the scholarship that is accessible to foreigners is written either by foreigners or from the diaspora, and much of it is quite self-consciously directed toward a non-Filipino audience. Such work is largely motivated—and laudably so—by the desire to sensitize North Americans and Europeans to some of the difficulties specific to women in Third World countries struggling to redefine themselves in a post-colonial but nevertheless economically and politically dominated context. The prostitution, export, and general commodification of female bodies by Third World governments arguably often interested more in furthering national development than in the welfare of their citizens; the abuse of female labor by multinationals; the health risks with which many Third World women contend in the face of governmental and global environmental exploitation, and so on all serve as critical challenges to First World feminists unaffected by (but, as First World citizens, inevitably complicit in and thus responsible for) years of neoimperialism.

In an attempt to underline the significance of such simultaneous oppression by virtue of both gender and Third World status, such writers as Delia Aguilar (1988), Belinda Aquino (1985), and Lois West (1992), all important scholars of Filipina feminism, have stressed the importance of Philippine nationalism to the feminist movement in the Philippines.¹ All three assert the inadequacy of Western individualism and abstraction to women's actualities in the Third World context, emphasizing the fact that many Filipinas have grown cognizant of the particularity of women's problems while involved in larger protests against the U.S. presence, the Marcos regime, inequitable economic policies, and unjust labor practices.

More specifically, West focuses on the *Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan* (KMK), the Women Workers' Movement, in order to forward her argument that Third World feminism is often coincident with and formulated within nationalist movements. The KMK was formed in 1985 by working-class women seeking a separate forum within which to

air issues of specific concern to female laborers.² The organization has fought for the removal of the U.S. bases (now gone), participated in human-rights campaigns, and lobbied for economic changes, paternity leave, menstrual leave, day care, the provision of female gynecologists and obstetricians, lighter work loads during pregnancy, and prosecution in a key sexual harassment case (Lubi and Tujan 1993). KMK members have also been known to engage in revolutionary activity (including armed struggle), and, with patriotic pride recalling *Siyudad* ideology, the collective attributes the oppression of Philippine women to “the introduction of decadent western capitalism and foreign culture” (West 1992, 572). Given the KMK example, then, West suggests that feminist-nationalist movements in the Third World are prototypically profamily and anti-individualistic and more concerned with the abuses of neocolonialism and material inequities than with specific questions of gender.

Nor is West alone in arguing the importance of attending to the ways in which foreign interests and capitalism play a part in Philippine women’s oppression. Aguilar also forwards this claim, citing Wynne’s interview data:

Although the women interviewed represent different sections of the population of almost 50 million—tribal minorities, church women, urban poor, industrial and agricultural workers, prostitutes, and professionals—to the last woman, the conviction strongly held and acted upon is that freedom from oppression as women can become possible only when the nation is liberated from U.S. domination and when the majority of the people can be released from poverty, illness, malnutrition, and other forms of deprivation rampant in a neocolony. (Aguilar 1982, 254)

Such commitment to emancipation from foreign and upper-class control is, Aguilar further suggests, evidenced by stories of concrete action on the part of Philippine women such as Lagganawa, who is working with the Kalinga in protest against the World Bank-sponsored Chico River Dam project; Petra, who is helping the Bontoc fight mining interests; and Flora, a union organizer in a sugar hacienda. Like many other Third World women exploited by virtue of their nationality and class, all three have developed resistance strategies independently of the U.S. women’s movement (Aguilar 1982). Indeed, their stories both exemplify the situation-specific nature of much social action and support

Aguilar's contention that institutionalized sexism is secondary to material concerns in each instance.

Aquino emphasizes the importance of material concerns to Philippine feminists, too. She argues that "in Southeast Asia, where as high as 80% of the populations of certain countries live under conditions of poverty, class inequality is a much more pervasive phenomenon than sexual inequality. . . . [C]lass, rather than sex, is the more significant variable in analyzing the role and status of women in Third World countries" (Aquino 1985, 343-44). Unlike the urban middle- and upper-class elite who "are products of, or have been exposed to, Western influences," the rural majority of Southeast Asian and Philippine women have "limited or no access to education, health, social, and other facilities or resources" (Aquino 1985, 322). Because of this, Aquino observes, revolutionary action and educational reforms in this part of the world are chiefly oriented toward liberation from capitalist oppression.

(Ms)REPRESENTING THE MASS MOVEMENTS

While such analyses laudably highlight the ways in which neocolonialism, economic inequities, and both international and local corporate interests in the Third World have contributed to the oppression of women, however, they also obscure other forms of internal or domestic oppression that have more to do with gender than with class or nationality. Notwithstanding the intimation that Philippine feminism has arisen within the context of and been supported by Philippine mass movements, the mass movements themselves remain significantly oppressive of women in many ways. Recall Sister Placid's talk of wife abuse, marital problems, and sexist attitudes within the activist groups with which she has worked, for instance. For the sister, such groups represent not so much arenas within which she has become conscious of her rights as a woman as arenas within which she has felt compelled to intervene, putting a feminism learned in the convent into practice in hopes of inspiring her compatriots to attend more closely to gender issues.

Likewise, Rita, a Filipina activist interviewed by Wynne, observes that the men she has worked with as a Philippine nationalist have often exhibited sexist (or feudal or bourgeois) attitudes toward women and further suggests that female political development within such larger resistance organizations is dependent not merely upon female initia-

tive but also upon male admission of female political capacities (Aguilar 1982). In addition, West notes that the KMK has to appeal to the union leadership of KMU, the broader labor organization with which the KMK is affiliated, in order to make demands of management. Moreover, while the KMK agenda supposedly encompasses male interests in its aspiration toward broad national reform, it seems the reverse doesn't necessarily hold true for the KMU:

historically women's issues were relegated to the background of nationalist issues. During the 1970s, the women's organization of the national democratic movement, a coalition of left-wing legal and illegal movements seeking Philippine nationalism, found that the leadership of the larger movement was male-dominated which meant that "women's concerns became a blind spot for the leadership." (Santo-Maranan in West 1992, 569-70)

Going through the KMU thus presents difficulties for KMK members insofar as women's concerns are not always prioritized by union leaders, who may compromise on such matters during negotiation and may label KMK requests unreasonable (Lubi and Tujan 1993). Indeed, according to Ka Nanette, a KMK member, "longer maternity leave, provision of day care and nursery, and menstrual leave are not strikeable issues" (Lubi and Tujan 1993, 31), and the KMK is often perceived (and dismissed) as antimale by those misunderstanding their feminist goals, including KMU officials.

Carmen, with her own history of nationalist activity, also told me that the mass movements weren't always as liberated as they are sometimes set up to be. While Philippine feminism remains quite nationalist in general, she observed that this does not necessarily mean Philippine nationalism is in turn feminist. Women within the national liberation movement are still "mixing the coffee," she said—in other words, relegated to support functions (such as supplying food and drink for their male companions) rather than given important or active decision-making roles. Then, too, the double burden of simultaneous responsibility for housework and wage work continues to impede significant female involvement in union activities, as West (1992) herself acknowledges: union husbands and fathers aren't necessarily any more likely than other Filipino men to assist their wives and daughters in the domestic sphere. In other words, the relationship between Philippine nationalism and Philippine feminism is clearly sometimes contradictory and obstructive—if the former has been important to the development of

the latter, Philippine nationalism is also complicit in the continued subordination of women and the relegation of issues specifically concerning women to secondary status.

PLURALIZING PHILIPPINE FEMINISM(S)

The centrality afforded Philippine nationalism by theorists of Philippine feminism obscures other relevant Filipina concerns, too. While West, Aquino, and Aguilar focus on working women in the Philippines—arguably as a corrective to the equation of feminism with middle-class Western versions of the same—it is important to also acknowledge other sorts of Filipina feminisms as legitimate, culturally specific movements that cannot simply be likened to Western feminism and therefore dismissed as somehow less Filipina. Mention might be made, for instance, of alternative Filipina women’s organizations such as MAKIBAKA (founded in 1970 by students and later affiliated with the Communist Party); the Concerned Housewives of Marikina; the Ermita Ladies Group (a society for businesswomen); the Association of Women in Theology (AWIT); Kapisanan ng mga Madre sa Kamaynilaan (a group of women religious); Katipunan ng Kababaihang Pilipina (an association of women professionals); Women Minding the Basics (originally Women for the Ouster of Marcos and Boycott, or WOMB); and the Alliance of Women for Action toward Reconciliation.³ Carmen also observed that there are many liberal (as opposed to socialist or Marxist) feminists in government, all concerned with women’s rights but neither involved with antigovernment activity (for obvious reasons) nor necessarily interested in radically challenging Philippine notions of gender and appropriate womanhood. There are now lesbian groups in the country, too, she said—which are more focused on lesbian rights than on national issues, having just begun to organize in 1992. In short, Filipina feminism is diverse—it is not enough to simply call it *nationalist* or *profamily/anti-individualistic*.

Nor should the ways in which Filipina feminists have made use of aspects of Western feminist theory be dismissed, obscured, or denigrated in an effort to more strongly situate Filipina efforts within the Philippines itself. Such appropriation need not be taken as a negative or as a betrayal of Philippineness. Rather, it may simply signify the creative (and culturally encouraged) ability of many Filipinas to translate different ideologies across different situations. While Aquino takes pains to distance Asian feminism from Western feminism in a laudable

attempt to squarely situate the former within Asia itself, such tactics seem unfairly exclusionary, and the suggestion that Asian feminists frown on Western feminism is not substantiated, but rather contradicted, by my informants' behavior. As already noted, Sister Justine not only is highly conscious of class questions and nationalist issues in the Philippines but also claims to have become inspired to investigate and work toward reconfiguring Philippine gender norms after listening to other feminists at an international conference. Her politics and her faith alike are syncretic: "Having encountered various ideologies and philosophies in the course of her personal and academic pursuits, she has successfully combined aspects of each value-set and appears to be comfortable with her own personal, eclectic approach to life. Her ecumenism is manifested in her work" (Almanzor 1990, 340-41).

Other examples might be cited here, too. The Madreng Babaylan ritual recounted earlier involved the use of North American Indian, U.S. New Age, and Mexican material; Sister Placid referenced Rosemary Radford Ruether, a prominent U.S. feminist theologian; Sister Josephine recommended American inspirational author Louise Hay; and the IWS library boasts a reasonably good selection of Western feminist literature. And my informants were not apologetic about borrowing from such sources. Sister Placid herself suggested to me that the "best elements" in both the West and Asia use their privilege to learn from others throughout time and across the world, with the revaluation of Native American traditions by ecofeminists and feminist theologians a prime example of the successful revitalization of traditional wisdom.⁴ In short, the Missionary Benedictines' opposition to Westernization does not imply consequent antagonism to Western feminism: their concerns about foreign exploitation have not bred a more generalized ethnocentrism.

The nuns' example also complicates the assertion that Filipina feminism is generally family oriented, in contrast to individualistic forms of U.S. feminism. As mentioned earlier, West classifies Filipina feminism as profamily, in contrast to its Western counterparts; while Aguilar says that "the family unit, generally seen in the west as the primary locus of women's oppression, here serves as a vehicle for mobilizing opposition to oppression" (Aguilar 1982, 255). And Aquino argues that

in Southeast Asian cultures, the tendency is not as strong as in the west to confront the traditional social structure and fault the family or male authority for injustice to women. . . . One's family or kin group is paramount, and is seen as an institution to be pre-

served and strengthened rather than questioned. . . . [W]omen in Southeast Asia, even those who would call themselves “feminists,” think of their families first and do not lament the heavier domestic burdens that they end up having even if they, like their husbands, hold down full-time careers. There is a strong inclination among Filipino women . . . to act more as partners or supporters, rather than as equals of men. They value complementary or compensatory roles rather than separate ones. (Aquino 1985, 342)

Again, however, many of my Missionary Benedictine informants, themselves celibate and childless, proved critical of traditional Philippine family dynamics. Sister Josephine, for instance, explicitly tagged the Philippine household as a primary site of sex-based oppression. Women in the Philippines, she said, learn passivity “from home, when we [are] kids. . . . Even if you’re suffering so much, you accept it, it’s what God gives you. It’s very—how Spanish we’ve been, for so many hundreds of years. You work, you just have to suffer in silence. [Changing such ideas] has to be a very long gradual process.” Moreover, according to Sister Justine,

The Filipino family is patriarchal and male oriented. . . . [M]an is at the highest position with authority, while woman is at the lowest rung of the ladder. Values perpetuated in the family are pro-male and discriminatory. For example, when the father arrives home from work, he gets special treatment, while the wife who works the whole day does not get any recognition or consideration. . . . [T]he boys are brought up as authority successor. On the other hand, like the mother, the girls are prepared for house chores. The best and choice foods are cooked as father likes, and in the distribution, the father gets the choice cut, the children next and the mother last. Thus, the woman is expected to be the ever-loyal wife and a self-sacrificing mother. . . . The man can play around because he will lose nothing, but the woman is morally bound to be at home and not look outside for any other kind of relationship. (Almanzor 1990, 346–47)

Then, too, recall the ways in which Sister Placid decried domestic violence and heavy-handed paternalism in the mass movements, while Sister Micha both voiced concern about Filipino socialization to filial obedience even in cases of incest and proudly observed that the congregation had earlier sheltered two abused women in Subiaco.

Nor is that all. Although West, Aguilar, and Aquino speak primarily of Philippine feminism as a collective, group phenomenon, Carmen both claimed that Philippine feminism was fragmented and assured me that many “independent spirits” could be found within the various Philippine feminist movements. Indeed, she appeared to position herself as just such an independent spirit rather than aligning herself with any particular organization or theoretical stance. And, as previously suggested in discussing the sisters’ local-level activism, many of my other informants exhibited a similar independence of spirit, enacting somewhat idiosyncratic versions of feminism within their primary spheres of influence. Sister Josephine, for example, evidenced a particular concern with the ways in which Philippine Catholicism continues to define women as secondary subjects, creating larger dependencies on male religious authorities. Sister Micha, on the other hand, had a good deal to say about the ways in which sexuality is problematic for Filipinas, who not only are vulnerable to rape and harassment but also are prohibited in many respects from leading sexually satisfying lives because socialized in a repressive tradition wherein women must walk a thin line between virginity and whoredom. Notably, such examples counter the apparent, if ironic, essentialism of much of the literature on Philippine feminism to date.

VISION REVISITED

And this brings us back to the point that my work is primarily concerned with religious women whose feminism arguably derives more from their faith than from anything else. My informants all positioned their politics as specifically and significantly religious, and the construction of their feminism as a religious impulse is, I think, both critical to their identity as Missionary Benedictines and indicative of the diversity of feminism within the Philippines.

Take Sister Justine, arguably the foremother of Missionary Benedictine feminism in the Philippines, for instance. Admittedly, as previously noted, the sister both emphasized the leftist, nationalist leanings of Pilipina and GABRIELA and talked of having become politicized during the Marcos years: “Most of the feminists in the Philippines, and I’m one of them, we all studied as political activists. I mean, it was the time of Marcos . . . and we thought that . . . we had to do something. We had really to struggle against all the injustices.” On the other hand, she also casts her radicalization as a leftist/nationalist in terms of a religious rev-

elation or rebirth of sorts. During the La Tondeña strike, she claims to have undergone what she significantly terms a “baptism of fire,” not only indexing the importance of Christian ideology to her larger understanding of life but also configuring her conversion in terms comprehensible, and probably particularly persuasive, to her primary community of reference (not to mention Philippine Catholics in general).

Nor is the sister’s choice of language here important only in underlining the primacy of her spirituality and legitimating her experience by way of that spirituality; Sister Justine’s “baptism” also appears to have catalyzed critical shifts in perspective with respect to her larger sense of identity, purpose, and place, effectively marking her initiation into and dedication to social activism much as Catholic baptism marks membership in the Church. For her, the strike afforded the recognition of mutualities of purpose and conviction in the midst of diversity. At La Tondeña, the sister told me, she found herself mixing with Marxists and atheists, which both entailed and signified the expansion of her faith. Moreover, she began listening to some of what her new comrades had to say. As she put it,

Our involvement in this whole thing changed also our way of looking at our religious life . . . because after our sisters got involved with the whole struggle of the people, then we realized, you know, we cannot live the way we are living, you know, so isolated, and so . . . our school was elitist, you know, catering to the upper 30 percent of society without really conscientizing them.

At last, she began to realize that

[a]nyone who enters the religious life whether through teaching, nursing, doing social work, etc. commits herself primarily to the preaching of the Gospel in her words and deeds, in her life. If action on behalf of justice is a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel today, any religious woman who is unconcerned with justice cannot be said to be living her commitment. (Mananzan 1992, 64)

Of course, if the sister both talks about her politicization in religious terms and attributes the radicalization of her spirituality to her baptism of fire, her receptivity to the workers’ pleas might also be put down to her faith, or, more specifically, to her religious training. Formation undeniably places significant emphasis on the development of empathetic

capacities, something the strike organizers themselves doubtless recognized in specifically targeting nuns for assistance. Nor should we underestimate the importance of official Church doctrine: the 1971 synod, with which Sister Justine has evidenced familiarity, issued a declaration encouraging social action in the face of oppression, for instance.

In other words, notwithstanding the importance of the Philippine crisis situation during the 1970s and 1980s to Sister Justine's radicalization, her politicization is nevertheless simultaneously foregrounded and backgrounded by her faith. Likewise, her feminism—an integral “aspect of the whole struggle to transform society”—is something arguably born as much of her religion as anything else. For her, fighting for sexual equality is necessary to the more general fight for justice, which, again, itself represents a religious imperative. Then, too, the very experience abroad she marks as having been significant to the development of a specifically feminist consciousness on her part was afforded her precisely because of her monastic status. The World Council of Churches invited her to the Venice conference on women where she was introduced to international feminist theory specifically because she was Missionary Benedictine. Moreover, Sister Justine observed,

Maybe I would not even have been a feminist if I did not become a nun. Because if you are [a member of the privileged classes, a socialite], you have it good. . . . You are not that type who are going to go into social activism. . . . You would internalize so much what the role of a woman is, which is the . . . cleaning the home, . . . being a good wife and mother, . . . and all these things. So anyway, even though I am not now for very young women to enter the convent, but in my own case, I must say that it has really helped me in developing my skills. Even to be a free person, you know. I have known in the convent what it is to be free, which a lot of married people don't even know or even experience.

And what, then, of the other Missionary Benedictines? As already noted, my interviewees uniformly credited Sister Justine for introducing them to feminism and opening their eyes to the relevance of gender in social life. In short, by their own accounts, they have become feminist precisely because witness and subject to Sister Justine's reformatory efforts as members of the same congregation. On the other hand, their very receptivity to her feminist arguments and analyses can

again be attributed, at least in part, to their training as nuns and to the ways in which feminism coincides with (or has been made to coincide with) their understandings of what it means to be Missionary Benedictine. Indeed, as already indicated, if Sister Justine is widely mythologized as the community expert on women's issues, clearly my other interviewees have also creatively and independently incorporated their own concerns about gender within their everyday lives as part and parcel of their larger mission. Being both nationalist and feminist, for them, is a matter of an all-encompassing, if flexible, religious imperative; religion is primary to, if always simultaneously subject to the influence of, the sisters' politics.

RELIGIOUS RADICALIZATION, RELIGIOUS RADICALISM

The significance of the Missionary Benedictines' spirituality to their radicalization also underlines the previously noted fluidity of their Catholicism. While religion in general and Catholicism in particular often serve as conservative forces in human social life, as indicated by my previous discussion of gender in the Philippines, it is important to recognize that my informants' understandings of faith were both reformatory and constantly in reformation. Nor should this be surprising. After all, the suggestion that religion can be radicalizing as well as reactionary is supported by extant scholarship; consider, for instance, the Philippines' history of Christian resistance to both the Spanish and the Marcos regime (Ileto 1979; Youngblood 1990), the ways in which the Zionist Tshidi of South Africa have protested their oppression under a neocolonialist regime through the appropriation and transformation of Christianity (Comaroff 1985), the countercultural tone of the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica (Lewis 1993), and the example of Latin American liberation theology (Ferm 1986).

In this case, however, the difference between the sisters' faith and that professed by the old guard of the Catholic hierarchy appears largely a matter of the degree to which particular aspects of religious doctrine are granted primacy over more abstract religious principles rather than assumed a matter of historical circumstance open to argument. Catholicism is conservative to the extent that traditional rules and religious regulations are deemed central to its practice; on the other hand, it clearly holds radicalizing potential as a spiritual system

essentially understood in terms of more ambiguous imperatives to love God, stand in solidarity with the poor, and work toward social justice. As Sister Justine put it in attempting to explain her spirituality to me,

In the matter of theology, I think that my [biological] sister is more churchy and conservative than I am. Because she has her religion up to high school: after that she has no more at her college, you see. After that, her theological knowledge has not grown, you know, so she is with the catechism and all that. . . . Yes, they study in theology and you have to understand that all these things, you know, and maybe it's like that, the more you get into a certain thing, you see all what is, you know, what's not important, you know. I mean, I'm sure that if they looked at my . . . belief system, they wouldn't even think I'm Catholic. . . . Oh, yeah! I mean, for example, I don't care if Christ was born of Mary and Joseph, and I don't care whether she's a virgin or not. Things like that, you know. I don't really much believe in the infallibility of the Pope and all these things. I mean, I think that he really can make a mistake, and he's done lots of mistakes, you know. And that there was a political and social reason for the declaration of infallibility, you know. I don't believe that I need all these dogmas and doctrines in order to lead a significant life. I will not use up my energy to contest them, either. If people find that they get something—nourishment, spiritual nourishment—out of it, then go ahead, but do they play any significant role in all that? Not at all. I mean, whether the Blessed Virgin is immaculate, it does not have . . . anything that makes my life a more developed one. . . . I am not better because he's immaculately conceived, you know. It doesn't have any practical . . . consequence to me whether this is or that. So, OK, if they want to believe it, then, OK, let them believe it, if they believe they have a guardian angel, OK. I mean, if it helps them to be better, OK. But I—must I burden all my life with all those kinds of things which I cannot prove anyway? It is either you believe it or you don't believe it, so OK. Why must it always matter? You know? What I think is that, OK, I have tried to live my life as significantly as I can, I have tried to make the people who come into my life more happy because they come into my life, maybe, rather than more sad, you know? I will use all my energies to see to it that wrongs are righted, as far as I can do it. . . . And that's it. And if I am not there, then I am not there. So I am dispensable. I am dispensable: if they can do it without me, OK. But I will do

what I can. . . . And so life becomes simple, isn't it? It's not so complicated as we want to make it to be. . . . It's really so much more simple.

The sister's profession of faith implicates the Missionary Benedictines' positioning within the larger Church, too. Notwithstanding the nuns' clear commitment to their spirituality, they remain secondary within, and thus are not necessarily particularly invested in, the institutionalized hierarchy. Indeed, my informants have been doubly marginalized by the Vatican both as non-Westerners and as women. Admittedly, Filipino Catholics are no longer structurally subordinate to the papal representatives sent to the Philippines by Rome; moreover, Filipino cardinals now have some say over who gets to be Pope, and Filipino bishops can now participate in the International Synod of Bishops.⁵ Nevertheless, the history of Catholicism is distressingly racist and colonialist, and much Church policy in fact remains Eurocentric. Pope John Paul II remains primarily dependent on the largely Italian-dominated Roman Curia, made up of those cardinals serving in Rome as administrators, rather than on the International Synod, for instance, while many Third World Christians continue to struggle against being represented more as missionary successes than as sophisticated theologians in their own right.⁶

Women also remain subordinated within the church: as indicated earlier, women of all nationalities are excluded from ordination as bishops or priests, and only bishops and members of male orders are able to participate in the most powerful central decision-making bodies in Rome. In fact, insofar as non-Western men can be ordained while even Western women cannot, the marginalization of women within the Church may be more organizationally significant than that of non-Westerners. The Church administration, formally headed by the Pope, includes the cardinal secretary of state, his assistant (the substitute and the secretary of the cipher), the secretary of the Council for Public Affairs, and nine sacred congregations headed by cardinals, all offices occupied by men (Safranski 1985). Moreover, the Church is apparently so reluctant to grant women a voice that they were initially excluded from the Second Vatican Council despite its supposed convocation specifically for reformatory purposes: a mere fifteen invitations to Vatican II were issued to women, and then only after the first and second council sessions when a Belgian cardinal questioned the Church's decision to ignore Catholic sisters while allowing non-Catholic males to attend in an ecumenical gesture (Burns 1992). In addition, while

“[o]rders of religious men . . . send representatives to both the national conferences and to the International Synod . . . religious women are not yet included” (Safranski 1985, 47). Furthermore, female religious orders may be banned by bishops within their dioceses. And what of the masculinization of divinity within Catholicism, not to mention the sorts of negative and unrealistic representations of femininity promoted by many Catholic practitioners? The Missionary Benedictines’ reformatory efforts aside, God continues to be popularly conceived of as male, and although potentially an important icon of female power, the Virgin Mother is still typically assumed to embody morally restrictive and overly idealized understandings of womanhood (Mananzan 1992).⁷ In short, Catholic myth and symbolism, at least as commonly represented in the modern Philippines, hardly seem encouraging of the development of female spiritual prowess.

If all of this underlines the liminal position of the Missionary Benedictines with respect to the Vatican, however, it is also worth noting that greater freedom—potentially interpretive, revolutionary freedom—may be had at the peripheries of such larger organizations precisely because the peripheries are typically deemed insignificant, and therefore are poorly policed, by those at the top. As already suggested in my discussion of the nuns’ local action in the Philippine context, marginal persons may have a great deal of transformative power insofar as they are well situated to experiment with and introduce potentially important changes into traditional systems. Subordinate positions may also afford a privileged perspective of sorts. While I have no wish to overromanticize subjugated standpoints, subjugated peoples may acquire special insight into the ways in which power operates and into the ways in which hegemonic structures may be altered (Haraway 1988; Tsing 1993).

Indeed, Youngblood (1990) suggests the applicability of a model of center and periphery to understanding the Catholic Church in the Philippines, with reference to radicalizing ground-level work on the part of the peripheral clergy. In addition, Burns claims,

For popes and bishops, the boundary separating faith and morals from sociopolitical issues is of crucial importance; to a great extent it defines the hierarchy’s relationship to the secular world, as well as defining the limits of collegiality. However, that boundary—whether perceived as something to maintain or to challenge—is less significant for groups less committed, both institutionally and ideologically, to the status quo. (1992, 130)⁸

In this case, then, as marginalized but committed Catholics working with the people themselves rather than spending time managing Church bureaucracy, my informants are well placed to understand the need for a situation-specific morality rather than blindly adhering to dogma in dealing with concrete, real-world problems.

FEMINIST BY ANY OTHER NAME?

Of course, recognizing the Missionary Benedictines' relative interpretive freedom highlights another complicating factor with respect to my fieldwork. My informants were in many ways unique individuals, rendering generalization about them inevitably problematic. And the point is of particular concern with respect to my interest in their activism on behalf of women in the Philippines. Thus far, I have been referring to the nuns' involvement and investment in women's rights issues as "feminist," with an emphasis on the everyday nature of much of their feminism. Yet the sisters not only ultimately proved surprisingly ideologically disparate but also represented themselves differently. Sister Justine observed that "about half the [congregation], maybe more than half, will consider themselves and would say themselves as feminist. . . . Then you are going to get some who do not." While many of my key informants used the label, then, others expressed reservations about it.

Predictably, when I asked Sister Justine if she thought of herself as feminist, she replied, "Oh, definitely! Oh, yes!" Moreover, when I asked what the term meant to her, she explained,

Before I answer what a feminist is, I must answer what I understand by the "woman question." And what I understand by it is this, that there is a state of exploitation, subordination, discrimination, and oppression of women as women that cuts through class, race, through nationality. In other words, it's a global structural attitude and a systemic problem. And this is the context of all the issues of women. OK, the moment that is clear, then . . . feminism is answering two questions: one, are you aware of the woman question? Number two, if you're aware of the woman question, are you willing, are you committing your energies to bring about a change in the situation? And if you answer two replies "yes," then to me this means you're a feminist.

Likewise, Sister Micha said she would call herself feminist, going, she said, by Sister Justine's definition: a feminist is someone who upholds women's rights, tries to make women aware of their position, and tries to mobilize them to act. And her feminism, she continued, influenced how she responded to her students and handled different cases; it influenced her judgment, even with her friends. For instance, she told me, she now definitely noticed and brought others' attention to language, as in when people would say "brothers" and leave it at that. Furthermore, as previously intimated, she was happy to capitalize on the emotional charge associated with the term *feminist*. During a chance encounter with me in the priory reception area, for example, Sister Micha introduced me to a male seminarian friend of hers by explicitly identifying me as a feminist. The sister was positively gleeful at his apparent but politely restrained discomfort upon receipt of this news, too. In fact, the subject having been successfully broached, she took the opportunity to proclaim herself also a feminist, leaving her companion virtually speechless.

Sister Placid, on the other hand, talked about her concern with gender equality in terms of a need for mass action in the present day:

The reason why I call myself feminist is because the society, the culture, is such that there is a need for a movement called *feminism*. I wait for a time and I work for a time—the waiting is not just passive waiting—I work for a time, which has to be a waiting at the same time, when there is no more need for a feminist movement because it is an established thing in the society that women have this and are this.

The sister sees feminism as something necessitated by modern times and conditions in the Philippines, then, rather than as an eternal principle; ultimately, she looks forward to an era in which Philippine society recognizes the artificial nature of differences ascribed the sexes on the basis of gender:

Already from the start, women and men are equal and should have equal opportunities, and I always say this to people who come to me with problems, men and women, wives and—couples, rather, you know, married couples, they come to me with problems. My standard maxim—I think it's coming from my own life, from my own family—is that it should not be that the man is always the one who wins an argument, it should not also be that

the woman is always the one who wins an argument. So one time, I tell them, if I am married, I cannot respect my husband if I'm the only one who's always winning an argument. I also cannot respect him if he will not allow me to win an argument. And . . . I cannot respect him either if he allows me to win an argument condescendingly. He must accept the argument because it is good and correct, it is logical, it is congruent with actual reality—that's the test of whether you're correct or not. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth. So for me that's very basic for the relationship between women and men. Then, who takes the role for which. There are things that women can do better than men for the simple reason that they were conditioned—by their culture, by their rearing, even by their physique, and probably even patterns in the brain. . . . There are also other things that men are more capable of, again for the same reasons. But that does not alter the fact that what a woman can do, a man can certainly do also. What a man can do a woman can certainly do also. I think the only thing that a man cannot do that a woman can do is bear children. And I think that's an advantage, a priority of the women over the men.

At the same time, however, the sister wanted me to understand that she was “not militant.” She cautioned me that she was

not a very aggressive feminist. But I get very angry when men are very condescending and take it for granted that they are a superior race. I get very angry with that. And I also get very angry with women who think that is how the men should be. . . . But otherwise I'm not very combative. I would rather function simply as a woman and show everybody this is what it means to be a woman.

Nor are such qualifying remarks insignificant. The very fact that even Sister Placid felt compelled to underline the nonaggressive nature of her feminism indexes, again, the degree to which the term is misinterpreted in the Philippines. As intimated earlier, even otherwise enlightened Filipinos often respond negatively to the label. As Sister Justine told me, “Once I did a seminar to our guidance counselors, and I put the word *feminist* on the board and I said, put anything that comes to your mind when you see it. You know what they did? OK. Sexually promiscuous, check; anti-man, check; . . . lesbian, check; aggressive, check.” In short, use of the word almost immediately requires clarification in the Philippine context, where it is laden with connota-

tions problematic not so much in and of themselves but because conflated with a term that in no way actually implies any of these things.

Sister Placid wasn't the only one of my informants to express misgivings about such public misconceptions about feminism, either. In fact, Sister Josephine took an even stronger stance on the matter. Although clearly committed to exploring gender issues and working toward women's rights, she also made it clear to me that she did not really want to be called a feminist:

Personally, I would prefer not to be labeled . . . because at this point, I feel that it's something that is still not very . . . known in our country. It's fast coming to the consciousness of people, especially in the Metro Manila areas, but when you get out of Metro Manila and go to the province, not yet, you know. So when you start to introduce it outside of Metro Manila, it's something very new. So I have made a decision, made a plan, that there has to be something like a gradual introduction to what it is. Very subtle, movie analysis, exposure to tapes of women who have worked abroad—things just to arouse their curiosity, and when they start to respond, then you come in to that. . . . Even [in] Bacolod, I didn't like it to be known that I was feminist. I didn't also like it to be known that I attended the course with Sister Justine, because there were very few. I could see that people were not very sold to the idea, some were even very negative. [Even women]—not as often, but some women who were kind of indifferent, who have simply accepted their fate, things like that. So I prefer if it's like that I know what I am for, and I know I can do this much, so I just want to be simply me. I don't even announce it. Many of my friends don't know I took the course.

Thus, from Sister Josephine's perspective, being tagged *feminist* was apt to do more damage than good. Associating herself with the term would, she felt, impede her chances of getting people to attend to the sorts of changes she was advocating. It was better, in her opinion, to simply act on her convictions without positioning herself within any sort of political movement whatsoever—not a surprising choice given her more general preference for local-level, everyday action as opposed to the sort of explicitly political rabble-rousing in which Sister Justine engaged.

Sister Claudia's reasons for avoiding the label *feminist*, in contrast, had little to do with concern about public misperceptions. While she

acknowledged that the term has “so many negative connotations” and was not an “in thing,” she was nevertheless willing to be publicly known as someone concerned with women’s rights. However, she said, she would rather call herself “pro-woman” than “feminist,” following the lead of Latin American female activists identifying as “*mujeres*” and African American female activists identifying as “womanist.” Feminism, Sister Claudia observed, has historically been most strongly associated in the popular mind with a largely white, middle-class U.S. and European population, which—again—has not always been sensitive to or understanding of differences among (and forms of economic, national, and racial oppression between) women. Terms like *womanist* or *mujeres* on the other hand, have consciously been adopted by women of color in order to highlight forms of subjugation and empowerment alike not necessarily familiar to or prioritized by white, middle-class American feminists. It was important to mark the cultural uniqueness of the Filipina situation, too—and, in Sister Claudia’s opinion, identifying as pro-woman was a step in that direction.

Nor was Sister Claudia alone in suggesting the need for a label other than *feminist* within the Philippine context. Recall my earlier discussion of the Madreng Babaylan, or “nun priestesses.” However eclectic and ecumenical the group may be in practice, its name quite specifically references a unique cultural heritage. As indicated earlier, the phrase both recalls a precolonial Philippine tradition of female religious specialists (thereby invoking an empowering and personally useful mythology of egalitarianism and female power in local history) and pays tribute to the significant influence of modern-day Philippine Catholic sisters. Being Madreng Babaylan, then, represents a particularly apt way of indexing Filipina interest in feminist theology or, for that matter, Filipina theologian interest in feminism, with both theology and the Filipina condition of primary concern to all involved.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

But what is to be made of such diversity in informant perspective? In part, the point is cautionary. While I set out to interview and have been broadly talking of “feminist” Catholic nuns in the Philippines, the very terms of my research now appear problematic. Although I have been focusing on the ways in which my informants have begun exploring new forms of womanhood and struggling to protect women’s interests and forward women’s rights of self-definition, my use of *feminist* as a

descriptive here might be called into question. While it functions as an adjective to signify the sorts of things Sister Justine indexes—an awareness of the “woman question” and a commitment to the reform of current gender norms—and while the sister herself says that she would call anyone exhibiting both traits a feminist, the fact that at least some of my informants nevertheless resisted the label marks a larger difficulty with the use of “home-grown” categories across diverse cultural contexts within anthropology.⁹ Speaking of the nuns as “feminist” here is essentially heuristic, but it also represents the imposition of my own assumptions about how the world works and about what particular behaviors and beliefs mean on my subject population.

I suspect at least some of my interviewees themselves would consider my use of the term as an adjective redundant, or even nonsensical, too. After all, as indicated earlier, the sisters do not strongly differentiate their politics from their religion. While I would call them not only feminist but also nationalist and even socialist and environmentalist for explanatory purposes, all of these qualities are, for them, encompassed by, superseded by, and arguably determined by the simple fact that they are Missionary Benedictine. In short, my attempts to deconstruct and classify their politics are inevitably questionable insofar as the nuns themselves understand their politics as always fundamentally religious in character and derivation; what’s more, their concern with social action on a large number of different fronts is ultimately, from the Missionary Benedictine perspective, representative of a single, cohesive, spiritual imperative.

In the end, then, although tagging the nuns *feminist* has been an analytically useful move in writing this book, such descriptive license remains presumptuous. I have chosen to employ such terminology in order to facilitate the cross-cultural comparison of activist efforts on behalf of women’s rights and to review and complicate previous studies of Philippine and Third World feminism. On the other hand, I do not thereby wish to abuse my authorial prerogative as an ethnographer and feminist theorist. Nor is the point of relevance only to the current situation. In fact, the appropriate and inappropriate use of labels is of more general concern within anthropology; many cultures have no concept of religion as a whole, for instance—in which case the documentation of select beliefs and traditions as examples of religious practice represents an ethnographic artifice for comparative purposes. In other words, classification in the social sciences is neither an obvious matter nor something to be taken for granted. Insofar as ethnography might be seen as an exercise in understanding alternative cultural prac-

tices and beliefs on their own terms, the application of non-native categorizations should perhaps always remain open to question.

In writing an anthropological account of the Missionary Benedictines' lives, I have thus attempted not so much a pretense at objective analysis as something akin to what West terms a

gendered cultural relativism . . . a methodological and theoretical perspective that puts women at the center of knowledge but contextualizes women's experiences to their culture. Theoretically, women's own understandings of their situations are the heart of this analysis. But in analysis of these interpretations, we critically seek to understand how culture constructs gender. (West 1992, 563)

And this, of course, necessitates the realization that terms such as *feminism* are and will always be ambiguous and essentially multiple in meaning. The trick, here, is to stop looking for an exact definition but rather to heed individual preferences as to the use of any number of different labels indexing a concern with both the social construction and radicalization of understandings of womanhood and manhood alike. Insofar as *feminist* is employed as a descriptive across diverse cultural contexts, it must necessarily remain contestable, with the recognition not only of a probable shared concern with gender but also of probable divergence in the face of local conditions and individual activist agendas. If first there was the Word, the Missionary Benedictine example cautions us to use it with great care.

Notes

Prolegomenon

1. The following is not intended as a public statement of any individual's personal or political views. I obtained permission to engage in interviewing and participant observation from the sisters in accordance with the human-subjects requirements established by the University of California, San Diego.

2. While interesting comparisons might be made between the Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations—particularly given apparent widespread gender parity and male and female complementarity in the region—I have chosen not to engage in an extensive review of other scholarship on Southeast Asia here both precisely because the Philippines has a unique colonial and thus religiocultural history and due to lack of space.

3. Historians, conversely, have done some excellent work on female mysticism and monasticism in the Middle Ages in particular; see, e.g., Bynum 1982.

4. While I used Filipino and Taglish with the nuns during informal conversation, most of my interviews were conducted in English, largely because many of my informants were not native Tagalog speakers and thus were more comfortable with English than with Filipino.

5. Of course, their narratives were always already retrospective in nature, reenvisioned and retold within the interview context in motivated response to my prompting and interest. Nevertheless, even filtered and selectively processed remembrances and recollections can, I think, reveal much about identity and self-conception.

6. Emotional and ideological predilections inevitably inflect ethnography, and it seems more intellectually honest to acknowledge them than to hide behind a pretense of noninvolvement.

Chapter 1

1. While *ora et labora* is a Latin injunction to pray and work, my informants often loosely translated *ora* and *labora* as nouns.

2. *The Seed* 1991.
3. At one of their fiestas, for instance, several sisters dressed up in stilettos and miniskirts, while others donned male garb, staging a somewhat racy play for the assembly. Feast days also involve a good deal of singing and dancing.
4. The image of the nun as strict ascetic seems to have gained hold with reference to the foreign missionary women initially responsible for establishing female congregations in the Philippines.
5. Criminals are much less likely to target nuns than lay women because the nuns are widely respected as religious figures and well known to be pledged to poverty. Nevertheless, the habit doesn't provide any absolute guarantee of safety. Sister Virginia was victimized when shopping for school supplies at a local mall: some fleet-fingered crook removed one thousand pesos from her pocket before she reached the checkout line. Another sister told me a story of attempted theft: while on a bus one day, she felt a hand reaching into her hip pocket. She slapped the hand and admonished the aspiring thief that all she had in her pocket was a pack of Skyflakes crackers—did he really want them that much?
6. Such Harlequin romances, full of highly idealized stories of true love despite difficult odds, can be purchased at innumerable Manileño street-vendor stalls. They are also carried in major bookstores and are consumed by a good many Filipinas, including my landlady's daughter.
7. Although most Filipinos identify as Catholic, many others are Muslim, Protestant, Taoist, or Buddhist or are affiliated with alternative indigenous forms of Christianity such as the nationalist Aglipayan Church (Philippine Independent Church) and the Iglesia ni Kristo (Church of Christ).
8. While the sisterhood was initially associated with the German Benedictine Congregation of St. Ottilien under its founder, Father Andreas Amrhein, it was established as a congregation of sisters directly under the Holy See (and headed by a superior general in Grottferrata, Rome) in 1924. The Missionary Benedictines in the Philippines initially established themselves in Tondo, one of the more impoverished districts of Manila, with the construction of their first Philippine school. As their clientele grew, they moved to San Marcelino and then to their current location in Manila proper, where St. Scholastica's College now serves an almost entirely female student body.
9. Catholic Bishops' Conference 1993.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Consider, for example, the Marcoses' appropriation of the legend of Malakas and Maganda to represent themselves as a near-mythical first couple (Rafael 1990). Twentieth-century Philippine feminists have also used the story to affirm the original sexual equality of the Philippine peoples.
12. Interestingly, “[m]en who aspired to be priests had to dress and act like their women counterparts” (Santiago 1995, 154; see also Cullamar 1986).
13. Although strongly officially opposed to *anito* worship, the Spaniards appropriated various *anitos* for their own purposes, reconfiguring the spirits as Christian icons (Santiago 1995). Many of the indigenous peoples, on the

other hand, continued to practice local customs alongside Christianity. For many, “conversion” was probably simply a matter of playing the part to avoid conquistador wrath. Moreover, many doubtless understood the new God in terms of their traditional cultural logic, as a more powerful and perhaps more insistent (and certainly more incomprehensible) *anito* but nevertheless simply one *anito* among many (Santiago 1995; Rafael 1988).

14. “The basic assumption in the Spanish court was that Filipino women, including criollas (Spanish women born and raised in the islands), were neither worthy nor competent to form religious communities” (Santiago 1995, 166). On the other hand, the Order of Poor Clares (the first sisterhood established in the Philippines, in 1621) originally planned to open its convent to all interested Manilañas and agitated for the development of a Filipina convent in Pandacan (Torres 1992). Likewise, many other female religious congregations established under Spanish rule were quick to accept Filipinas as full members (Santiago 1995).

15. While my Tagalog-English dictionary (English 1986) does not list *solid* as a translation of *sarado*, the sister seems to be suggesting that the phrase *Katoliko Sarado* is colloquially taken to mean “solid Catholic.”

16. The sister claimed the “third-year syndrome” relatively common among potential applicants.

17. Social pressures exist within the Philippines to make light of difficulties in public.

18. The sister identified herself as a stickler for organization and order; she generally had little tolerance for mess and often pointedly teased me about the regularity with which my hair worked its way free of my braids.

19. See also Eugenio 1994.

20. While the suggestion that I consider the convent was not comfortable for me, the sisters were not entirely off base in assuming that my research was more than simply anthropological. I could identify with the desire to live a meaningful and ethical life, I am concerned with gender systems as a woman and feminist, and I have long been interested in issues of both individual agency and creativity, given my own struggles with limiting cultural expectations. In other words, my motivations were manifold, and they have undoubtedly heavily influenced my perspective as an ethnographer (Clifford and Marcus 1986; di Leonardo 1991; Haraway 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

21. Women in particular must contend with potentially problematic configurations of femininity and female sexuality within orthodox Catholicism, as illustrated by the Madonna-whore dichotomy and the expectations of Marian-like behavior once espoused by even the Missionary Benedictine schools in the Philippines.

22. See Constantino 1975; Constantino and Constantino 1978; and Schirmer and Shalom 1986.

23. In this respect, the Philippines resembles precolonial Malaya and Indonesia. Burma, Vietnam, and Cambodia, in contrast, were all unified under indigenous rulers prior to colonization.

24. These communities were headed by *datu*, village leaders who gained their position through their political facility, access to resources, and ability

to create support networks through establishing exchange relations with others. Their power was fluid and relative, a matter not of birthright but of the strategic negotiation of debts.

25. Assuming the existence of a fixed status hierarchy, the Spanish effectively imposed a class system on the indigenous peoples (see Rafael 1988 for a provocative account of Tagalog responses to the colonization of the Philippines). The country remains highly stratified to this day: roughly 2 percent of the population controls 75 percent of the land and capital (Mananzan 1992).

26. As devout if not always very good Catholics, the Spanish were interested not only in securing access to Philippine resources but also in Christianizing the Philippines, an endeavor effectively serving and served by their imperialist efforts.

27. Conversion is not always forced: foreign deities are often relatively easily incorporated into existing pantheons, if more rarely accepted in monotheistic fashion. That aside, see Rafael 1988 on the ways in which power was both consolidated and contested within the confessional.

28. See Anderson 1983.

29. Rafael (1988) suggests that the first Filipino converts creatively appropriated (and in so doing elided and resisted the deeper meanings of) the linguistic and religious signs forced on them in a context of military domination that rendered any attempts to ignore the Spanish unrealistic.

30. Filipino religious figures who could authoritatively interpret Catholicism in ways favorable to nationalist efforts—in support of the Propagandist movement, for example—were key in undermining a popular sense of religious indebtedness to the Spanish (Schumacher 1979).

31. Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, perhaps the most well known work of literature in the Philippines, is widely credited for inciting mass revolt against the Spanish. While the tale of corrupt Spanish priests and indigenous heroes represents a critique of colonialism in and of itself, however, its fame rests largely on the strong response it provoked: Rizal was banished and eventually assassinated because the Spanish considered the book threatening. In executing Rizal, the Spanish effectively martyred him and aroused even greater revolutionary zeal on the part of many Filipinos. Interestingly, because the *Noli* was written in Spanish—a language in which only the *ilustrados* were trained—the story probably was not widely read but rather was orally transmitted among the masses.

32. The official national language of the Philippines is now Filipino, a newly created language subject to a great deal of controversy because it is based primarily on Tagalog, the tongue of the national capital region, virtually excluding many other indigenous Philippine dialects.

33. The drive for Philippine independence was backed by both American anti-imperialists and racist Americans angry about the special immigration rights accorded Filipinos as citizens of a U.S. territory. The Philippines passed a parity amendment to its constitution granting special rights to U.S. investors in 1946 and signed a ninety-nine-year U.S. military base agreement in 1947 (although the United States relinquished its Philippine bases in 1992).

34. Justifying his actions with dubious reference to governmental corruption and conspiracy, Marcos jailed his political opponents and instituted policies giving him the power to legislate by his own decree, override the Philippine Assembly, and make arrests at will. Thus, he effectively established a dictatorship, even with the nominal dissolution of martial law in January 1981.

35. See Goodno 1991; Karnow 1989; Schirmer and Shalom 1986; and Steinberg 1994.

Chapter 2

1. The sister's dishonesty is notable given her concern with Christian morality. The justification here seems to be the primacy of her calling, apparently rendering such dishonesty a minor and legitimate sin.

2. See Warner 1976 for a discussion of the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary throughout Church history.

3. In the Philippines, older siblings are usually expected to help out with the care of their younger brothers and sisters. In such cases, entrants are generally allowed leave without having to repeat their aspirancy.

4. Andres and Ilada-Andres 1987.

5. Thanks to Fenella Cannell for pointing this out.

6. Eugenio 1996, 74, 80, 81, 361–63.

7. Although Blanc-Szanton (1990) acknowledges restrictions constraining the mobility of unmarried girls in the Visayas, the married women of Estancia appear to be granted much more freedom of movement.

8. While Mrs. Seth was ethnically Indian, she was born and raised in the Philippines. Tagalog was her native tongue, she enjoyed traditional Filipino food, and she attended Catholic Mass every Sunday.

9. The fact that many Filipino men have second (or third or fourth) families makes for a good many abandoned women and children.

10. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising to find knowledge presumed to corrupt women in an overwhelmingly Catholic nation when, for Catholics, Eve represents the original sinner.

11. Comparisons might be made between Ferdinand's claims and the gender stereotypes uncovered by Blanc-Szanton's work in Estancia, the Visayas, where males are "seen as easygoing, generous, and fun-loving but easily offended, and females as more reliable, more skilled in economic interactions, and more inclined towards verbal rather than physical abuse" (Blanc-Szanton 1990, 378). Blanc-Szanton further observes that such characteristics are seen as complementary.

12. While most of my Manileño informants placed a great deal of emphasis on female virginity, Cannell (1999) observes that female virginity wasn't granted such significance in the Bicolano villages she has studied, and Blanc-Szanton (1990) suggests that the emphasis placed on female virginity in the Visayas is not as strong as in many Mediterranean cultural contexts.

13. Of course, I suspect few Philippine women consider the *querida* system a desirable aspect of their heritage. After all, it is a one-sided system.

Had former president Corazon Aquino taken a lover, the public would hardly have been supportive; even after her famed husband's death, she was expected to remain faithful to his memory.

14. See Cannell 1999 and Johnson 1997 on *bakla* beauty contests.

15. See Stoler 1991 on colonial understandings of gender elsewhere in southeast Asia. More generally, it is important to observe that women have both lost and gained rights and opportunities under colonization. Blanket status assessments (and perhaps the term *status* itself) are thus suspect in the absence of specificity (di Leonardo 1991).

16. One of the first modern feminist organizations in the Philippines, MAKIBAKA, formed in part in protest over a beauty contest. Moreover, GABRIELA protested the Miss Universe contest in the Philippines, condemning it as a costly marketing ploy to increase tourism.

17. Why? Perhaps in part because males are allowed greater mobility while women are expected to remain relatively housebound. Moreover, men who act feminine are essentially taking up a less dominant (and thus more tolerable) position, whereas women who act masculine may be seen as insubordinate and as agitating for power not rightfully theirs. Female cross-dressing in the Philippines is also simply much less glamorous, much less visible, and much more everyday than male transvestitism.

18. The *bakla* is also often the butt of jokes.

Chapter 3

1. *Veil* here refers both to the veil itself—a head covering symbolizing humility before God—and the Missionary Benedictine costume in its entirety.

2. The congregation now sends applicants to be tested at an intercongregational formation center in Metro Manila.

3. During Sister Mary Peter's time, the process included a year of candidacy, a year of postulancy, and a year of the novitiate.

4. The community superiors play an important role in facilitating such reconciliation.

5. Much as I was tempted by Mona's invitation, I declined because both concerned that my actions would be seen as sacrilegious by the more conservative sisters and well aware that my desire to participate in the ceremony was anthropological, not religious.

6. Community recreation both provides relief from the serious business of becoming a nun and facilitates the development of community feeling. Entrants are also allotted a certain amount of free time.

7. Entrants are supposed to observe silence after 10:00 P.M.

8. Many of my informants spoke of having become politicized during the Marcos years. Sister Justine and Sister Jacoba claimed the national crisis situation key to their personal and congregational radicalization, while Sister Placid told me that she had begun to work full time with the anti-Marcos mass movements in 1975.

9. See also Bynum 1982 on the use of maternal imagery, the feminization of religious language, and female monasticism in the High Middle Ages.

10. Of course, Catholicism is hardly unique in this respect; many forms of Protestantism restrict religious roles for women and define femininity in limiting fashion. Nor are traditional Hinduism or fundamentalist Islam any less patriarchal (although in every case it is important to examine variations in practice at particular points in place and time).

11. See Cannell 1995 on the ways in which female healers in Bicol imitate Christ as a “shamanic exemplar.”

12. During Sister Micha’s time, novices were sent out for only two to three months. The time period has been extended to provide a better taste of the life.

13. Novices do not always have much choice about their assignments; such decisions are made by superiors in formation, in concert with the provincial governor.

14. While the juniorate now lasts a full five years, it was only three and a half years when Sister Mary Peter entered and only three years during Sister Micha’s time. The sisters adapted their formation program after the Holy See recommended extending the juniorate.

15. While the Missionary Benedictines now admit candidates only once a year, the juniors making their perpetual vows while I was in Philippines had entered (and thus were graduating from formation) six months apart.

Chapter 4

1. My seminarian friends in the Philippines appeared even more strongly focused on sexuality—one told me that men in his order were encouraged to have platonic girlfriends and to channel their sexual curiosity into the consumption of erotic movies and pictures.

2. The physiology of female sexuality is still open to debate, of course.

3. Sex is hardly the only—or even the primary—factor motivating Filipino women to marry. Filipinas are not only socialized to push their own sexual needs aside but also to desire husbands for financial security, legitimate reproduction, status and cultural acceptance, and even love and romance.

4. Sister Sylvia, Sister Placid, and Sister Justine—all high-profile activists responsible for expanding the congregation’s mission thrust in new directions—appear to have been allowed greater freedom of choice. Such cases are relatively unusual, however.

5. It was not by accident that Sister Micha and Sister Josephine became my primary informants: both remained in the Manila priory/college complex even after the April rotations, rendering them far more regularly accessible to me than most of my other interviewees.

6. Filipinos typically term Metro Manila “the city” and everywhere else “the province.”

7. During the tenure of my research, I became friends with two Chinese aspirants secretly being coached for the convent as well as several Indian nuns brought over to the Philippines for formation after their congregation was annexed by the Missionary Benedictines. Both the Chinese and the Indians talked to me of significant misunderstandings and exhibited resistance

to Filipinization. On the other hand, my Filipina informants did not appear to recognize the imperialist tinge to the ways in which they were attempting to remake their guests in Philippine fashion.

8. See Constable 1997 on Filipina domestic servants in Hong Kong.

9. The language issue was a sore point for Sister Micha, who had advocated the use of indigenous dialects during the graduation liturgy at the Holy Family school; she was unhappy that the graduating class had insisted on English to prove itself as good as its Scholastican counterpart.

10. She had had to petition to be allowed to live in such an unorthodox community, but the fact that her superiors ultimately agreed to let her do as she wanted attests to the flexibility of the congregation's rules.

11. During the Marcos dictatorship, a relative of Imelda's named Herminio Disini became heavily involved in Philippine politics and prospered tremendously from his position. As head of Herdis Management and Investment Corporation, Disini helped to engineer a deal in which Westinghouse's highly inflated bid on the construction of the Bataan nuclear power plant was accepted over General Electric's much lower bid. Following the Chernobyl accident and the growth of Filipino anti-nuclear sentiment, however, the Aquino government halted work on the plant (Schirmer and Shalom 1986).

12. Some unemployed townfolk apparently initially cooperated with the government in working on the plant, although they told Sister Sylvia that they took the work on faith that the plant would never become operational.

13. The Roman Catholic Church, led by Pope John XXIII, convened its second ecumenical council—Vatican II—in 1962. At that time, the Church instituted the vernacularization of the liturgy, recommended greater lay participation in Church activities, acknowledged the importance of ecumenical dialogue with other churches, and initiated various reforms of relevance to the lives of men and women religious in the modern world (see Gaerlan 1993).

14. Such remembrances not only mark the importance of historicizing the community's radicalization but also signify the Philippineness of the congregation.

15. The German HDF sponsors had their own ideas about the use of their money, however, despite their distance from and lack of familiarity with the Philippine situation.

16. St. Benedict lived as a hermit for some time in Subiaco, Italy.

17. The sisters have additional opportunities to get away. On the first Sunday of every month, Sister Josephine told me, they engage in "recollection" ("a whole day of prayer") to reaffirm their personal faith; they "have eight days retreat every year . . . for refueling"; they can request "psychospiritual renewal or sabbatical leave" every seven years; and they can ask for more time off as needed.

18. *Balut* is a Filipino delicacy consisting of a chick in its shell; *sampaguita* is an indigenous flower.

Chapter 5

1. While I am using Filipino spelling, the cult is also known as the Suprema de la Iglesia del Ciudad Mistica de Dios.

2. While Carmen was one of my primary informants about the Siyudad, she remained an outsider engaged in an act of translation. I do not in fact know how accurate believers would deem her explanations. Although Mr. Santos seconded her arguments, there are doubtless large gaps, both of experience and background, between the ways in which the cult has been rendered here and the ways in which cult members might define themselves and their directive. After all, Carmen was keenly interested in the cult's logic and may well have been forwarding interpretations of its activities that were far more explicitly coherent than those maintained by its members—much as I am attempting to make sense of my own field data in ways perhaps quite alien to my subject populations. The problem here is not unique: anthropologists are typically highly dependent on their closest interviewees' perspectives to supplement general observations of and encounters with larger subject populations. Much ethnographic knowledge is thus inevitably secondhand, which is not a bad thing per se but is something of concern with respect to the possibility, and perhaps the probability, of misrepresenting others.

3. Constable (1997) suggests that not all Hong Kong employers share the view that Filipinas are ideal household servants.

4. While *nationalism* is difficult to define, the populations in question identify as nationalist because explicitly dedicated to promoting Filipino well-being in light of historically based concerns about both foreign and local exploitation. See Anderson (1983) on the development of (imagined) national identities within colonial contexts. Comparisons might also be made between the Siyudad and other anticolonial syncretic millenarian sects in Southeast Asia, including the Cao Dai in Vietnam (Oliver 1976).

5. Ironically, the colors of the Philippine flag are the same as the colors of the U.S. flag. If displaying these colors was subversive for the Siyudad, it might well have been understood in very different ways by the Americans in the Philippines.

6. It is doubtful that Rizal, a strong critic of the Church, conceived of himself as another Christ.

7. Priestesses are ordinary laborers and are not compensated for their religious services. The church does not collect taxes. While the town is officially run by a separately elected *barangay* captain, however, all of the 250 or so adults residing in the community subscribe to the faith (what's more, Suprema claims close to 50,000 followers nationwide).

8. Ileo 1979 is a good reference with respect to the popular and peasant nature of Philippine millennialism.

9. In this case, our debt was mediated through the presence of Carmen, who, as an interested theologian, acted as a self-appointed translator for the rest of us. She appeared to view this endeavor more as an open exchange of knowledge than an exercise in hospitality. Yet such scholarly dialogue itself involves considerations of power: knowledge, specifically spiritual knowledge, is and has been historically used in the Philippines to maintain control over others. The early colonial Spanish male priests, for example, initially claimed special and supreme knowledge, thereby positioning themselves as experts in a way Philippine women could never be by virtue of both their

gender and their race. By Siyudad reckoning, in contrast, Filipinas are the recognized experts.

10. I am not sure if this is the true etymology: my Tagalog-English dictionary (English 1986) lists *panatika-ko* as a term of Spanish origin but fails to indicate the origins of the word *panata*. Nonetheless, the Siyudad has reappropriated what was doubtless intended as a derogatory appellation for positive, self-empowering purposes.

11. We visited Santa Lucia Falls, Jacob's Well, and the Twin Caves of Peter and Paul. More devout pilgrims go on to Judgment, marked by passage through a long narrow cavern; Calvary, marked by a hike up into hills representing sacrifice; the Cave of the Father, marked by a trek seven thousand feet up the mountain; and finally Paradise, where two waterfalls signifying Creation can be found in the crater of the extinct volcano.

12. See McCoy 1982 on animist *babaylanism* in the Philippines.

13. Of course, all social beings, including those professing a more unified sense of self, maintain potential membership in multiple, often conflicting, communities of reference, variously indexed within different contexts for different purposes.

14. The phrase can be literally glossed as the “settling down of the water of life,” although Nona's gloss probably more clearly duplicates its affective tone and poetic meaning. *Pagtining* is deep Tagalog and indicates depths of stillness.

15. The distinction I am drawing here is again complicated with respect to the frame of reference involved—Catholicism, after all, is still widely deemed a more mystical faith than Protestantism, although I have been arguing that it is more intellectual than the Siyudad Mistika.

Chapter 6

1. My informants' motivations were multiple and complex. Sister Micha, for example, used the interviews partly to clear away cobwebbed stereotypes about nuns.

2. Although also encouraged to be modest, most modern-day Philippine monks eventually become priests, a high-status career engendering both significant respect and the sort of glamour associated in the United States with high-powered professions such as law and medicine. Thus, male Filipinos may be more likely than their female cohorts to undertake a religious vocation to feed ambitions for fame and recognition.

3. Likewise, ethnographers make use of cultural distance to develop a greater understanding of cultural alternatives.

4. My sources were in conflict about *Pilipina's* founding date and even about the organization's name: some sources also instead term it *Filipina*. Almanzor (1990) sets the founding date at 1980, Lanot (1985) writes that it was founded in 1981, and Sister Justine claims to have established it in the 1970s (when talking with me, she set the date at 1977). While I found this confusion frustrating given my desire for accuracy, perhaps there is a lesson

here—it may not matter so much exactly when Pilipina was established, at least not to the founders; rather, the important thing is that it was founded during the Marcos years as one of the country’s first feminist organizations.

5. GABRIELA’s member organizations include Amihan, a federation of peasant women; Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan, an alliance of women workers; SAMAKANA, an organization of urban poor women; Innabuyog, an alliance of indigenous women’s organizations in the Cordillera; GABRIELA-Youth; and the Association of Women in Theology. Notably, GABRIELA’s diversity underlines the diversity of Filipina feminism.

6. While primarily focused on such local issues, GABRIELA also maintains an international desk and sponsors an annual Women International Solidarity Conference.

7. While the use of missalettes is common Catholic practice worldwide, the routine was new to me at the time.

8. Few of the priests used inclusive language—rendering it all the more difficult for the nuns to be forbidden the priesthood themselves.

9. While it may seem strange that the nuns use inclusive English rather than reverting to gender-neutral Filipino forms, their choice probably reflects the assumption that English is better suited to communication with a broad audience, not to mention the fact that the congregation includes native speakers of many of the different languages indigenous to the Philippines. Moreover, making a point about inclusive language through the use of English represents one means of making a larger point about gender in Catholic tradition.

10. Electives offered include Women and Literature, Women in Arts and Media, Feminist Research, Women in Politics, and Popular Education for Women.

11. Regular offerings include such classes as Gender-Fair Education, Women and Development, Women and Health, Feminist Theories, Gender Issues in Marriage, and even Aikido, Tai Chi, Core Energy, Enneagram, and Neurolinguistics.

12. The phrase *the woman question* was also current in Victorian England.

13. The *bakla* example aside, such body consciousness is notably weaker when it comes to Filipino males, although I did meet men who took pride in their strong physiques, Western wear, and fashionable hair, and although men participate in and actively maintain the cultural belief that a woman’s looks matter.

14. Philippine Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin recently observed, “Women have another mission in the world and should not become priests. Besides, who would go to confession anymore if the priest was a woman? A woman will not keep the secret” (Quote, Unquote).

15. Notwithstanding the sister’s observations, many Filipinas are not very subservient, as demonstrated by both the nuns’ example and the tenacity of the myth of matriarchy.

16. While legislation may well eventually be enacted prohibiting incest, further criminalizing rape, and protecting lesbians, attitudes toward sexuality are not very amenable to legislative regulation.

Chapter 7

1. See also Jayawardena 1986 for a historical overview of Filipina feminism and its connections with Philippine nationalism.

2. The KMK currently claims to represent fifteen thousand women workers—a significant but still small number when compared to the more than eight million women workers reported by the Philippine Department of Labor in 1986 (West 1992). Although the KMK originally comprised primarily laborers in factories and in the service sectors, by 1988 peasant women, sugar workers, and miners' wives were included.

3. MAKIBAKA's first public action was the picketing of a beauty pageant: "The picket attacked the commercialization of sex, the degradation of women as objects of pleasure, and the irrelevance of beauty contests in a poverty-stricken country" (Fortaleza in Aquino 1985, 338).

4. Many Native Americans are not happy about the appropriation of their traditions by outsiders, a point lucidly made in the Cheyenne film *White Shamans, Plastic Medicine Men*.

5. Cardinals are bishops with elective power over the Pope; they are also qualified to occupy certain exclusive administrative positions in Rome. The International Synod of Bishops is called every three years for consultation, with a steering committee active in the interim.

6. The structural possibility of greater power on the part of international Church participants remains present, a possibility that may be utilized to a greater degree by future Popes.

7. Burns (1992) observes that the Church itself has created the conditions for feminist insurgency on the part of many female orders. The Second Vatican Council, convened between 1959 and 1961, encouraged Catholic sisters in their attempts to gain greater control over their lives, permitting at least limited experimentation on the part of individual orders. And although "it is clear from [Rome's] later disputes with some communities that it expected that women religious would concentrate on minor external changes in their habits, their daily schedules of prayer and other activities, and their relationships to the larger Catholic community . . . reaffirm[ing] commitment to the traditional interpretation of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience," many sisters in fact instituted more radical reforms (Burns 1992, 137).

8. Bailey (1993) further argues that some degree of practical or symbolic resistance or disengagement is characteristic of institutions in general and is probably even necessary to their survival given the unforeseen contingencies with which institutions are constantly forced to contend. Rarely are the members of a collectivity always and entirely committed to the collectivity: their evasions, rule breaking, and outright rebellion may variously forward, inhibit, and redirect organizational aims.

9. In many respects, I very much agree with Sister Justine's definitions of feminism. I call myself feminist because I am concerned about the ways in which culturally constructed understandings of gender play into and are affected by larger systems of power and privilege, and because committed to reformist action in pursuit of more egalitarian ideals.

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