

## **The Islands of Faith: Crossroads of Mission**

by Andrew Gimenez Recepcion,  
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University presses are a boon to reading and scholarship, specifically and obviously in terms of their work and output. They do a service for the academic community (they are usually connected with universities, of course), publishing works for instance by their professors. And then for us, obviously and of course, they provide worthwhile publications for our reading consumption.

In the case of this particular book, we have a most fitting and deserving opus from the Ateneo de Naga University Press. *The Islands of Faith* by Fr. Andrew Recepcion has been awarded as the Best Book in Spirituality and Theology, at the 41<sup>st</sup> National Book Awards of the Philippines. It is essentially a compilation of nine essays (papers, perhaps?) of the author, on diverse themes, seemingly at first disconnected and disparate. Immediately we have a recommendation, based on this observation of ours. If only to offset the apparent disconnectedness of the nine essays in the book, then the inclusion of a Foreword, or a Preface (or even just an Introduction) could have offset the somewhat awkward association of the different essays. Indeed, such a feature is sorely lacking. Due to this oversight, the book seems to “limp,” as it were.

Actually, the essays in themselves are excellent. They touch on various themes or topics, all falling mainly under the branches of missiology and pastoral theology. At the same time, the sociological perspective is dominant throughout. They may also be touching on ecclesiology, history, and evangelization; at the same time there are sprinklings of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. All the essays are

also in a clearly Filipino context, which is not to say however that the author's overall perspective is narrow or parochial.

Fr. Recepcion, after all, is both qualified and capable in his writing. A priest of the Archdiocese of Caceres (in the Philippines), he holds several ministerial positions, and serves in various tasks and responsibilities with Rome as his base. His specialization is missiology (with a doctorate from the Pontifical Gregorian University), and he has several teaching assignments in various countries.

He starts off with an elaboration of the concept of *diakonia*, laying the groundwork as it were for a well-focused and solid pastoral reflection. Specific issues follow, with an essay devoted to each of them: the Philippine mall culture against the backdrop of globalization; faith, culture, and dialogue; ecclesial movements; Pentecostalism in the Philippines; interreligious dialogue; migration; the environment; and *missio ad gentes* and its ramifications and implications for the Philippines. By way of examples (at least a couple, out of the nine), let us review two of Fr. Recepcion's essays contained in the book. These are: the one on malls, and the other on the environment.

At the outset, these two may appear strange and unconnected to the overall theme of the book (which, as we pointed out, is the Church's mission). But it should be easy to see why such topics are still very much connected, given the far-reaching and wide scope of the fields of pastoral theology and missiology.

Indeed, why malls? The author explains, they are "a popular vehicle of cultural globalization in the Philippines." He even goes to the extent of naming a specific Philippine mall as "a metaphor that captures the context of the Philippines today." However, we find the reasons for these claims of the author to be insubstantial. Be that as it may, he looks at the

mall phenomenon for its missional implications. "It can be considered as a new temple of Filipinos where they can come in contact with the values of the global village . . . [and] it can also create new avenues for reaching out to the unchurched and opening up new practical pastoral strategies." Filipinos are familiar with this last point: they are aware of the popular Sunday Masses celebrated in malls, for example, as well as the presence of prayer rooms or chapels as a service provided by mall operators.

Having established this, therefore, Fr. Recepcion embarks on an examination of seven countercultures in the face of the dominant cultures proposed by cultural globalization. In this, however, the mall concept seems to have disappeared from the discussion – except for the values espoused by it (consumerism, individualism, superficiality, marginalization, and others). It would have been better if the link were shown more clearly – the link, that is, between malls and such values – as to how they foster such negative values. We do not intend to demonize malls certainly, but only seek a more explicit correlation. If indeed malls are "indices to cultural globalization," they become "the contact point for individuals to understand or distort their valuations of material."

In this sense now, mission is "the counter-culture [sic] in the global village." There are four foundational principles for this, which Fr. Recepcion tackles: 1) the human persons as the historical subjects of their destiny; 2) inclusive relationships which welcome everyone and denounce the many forms of exclusion and marginalization; 3) transforming relationships which lead to healing, peace, and reconciliation; and, 4) apostolic synergy, challenging everyone to partnerships and networking.

If only to rein in the discussion back to what the article presents as its case-in-point (the malls in the Philippines),

we can therefore ask: can malls play a role or function in such a problematic? Unless the author presumes a between-the-lines reading of the latter part of the essay, no clear and explicit answer is presented to the reader. In any case, the essay as a whole is a thought-provoking discussion on a social phenomenon impinging on theology (missiology, specifically).

And then, for our second example (the eighth essay of the book) – the one on the environment and ecological concerns, that is – the author starts off from an established and definite point-of-departure: that is, the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis. He also includes a survey of the Filipino worldview on creation, with the help of songs and myths. (He gives an example each to both of these.) Coming from this instance of inculturation, Fr. Reception proposes some possible ways of understanding an integral ecological formation. But before such proposals, he looks at the formation process first more closely.

Regarding such a formation process, a dualistic perspective is set aside in favor of a more harmonious interrelationship. The author underscores the importance of “being in the other and living for the other.” As a matter of fact, formation for him does not only affirm the innate goodness of every creature, but also the fundamental relationship that supports all of creation. The elements of this integral ecological formation essentially involve the following paradigm shifts: 1) awareness: change of mindset (from dominion to connection, from autonomy to gratitude, from self-love to awe), and 2) lifestyle: change of values. Under this last point, the author performs the service of providing for us practical applications which can be readily carried out (regarding simplification of lifestyle, consumption of products, the recovery of a serene harmony with creation, and the practice of gratitude).

All in all, the result is even better than the previous one we saw earlier concerning mall culture. What was originally a paper delivered in a theological forum turns out to be an excellent text which can be helpful for providing a basic orientation on ecological spirituality and formation.

We must still point out, however, that there are inopportune shortcomings in the writing of the essays, from a typological and a methodological point-of-view. The endnotes after each essay could have used a standard style or format regarding citations and references; and then, there are one or two typos (orthographical errors) which unfortunately didn't escape our notice. Nevertheless, we would like to believe that these unfortunate occurrences do not lessen the overall value of the book. We only lament perhaps the lack of judiciousness in the editorial process, which should have easily forestalled such errors. It seems also inconsistent with the visible and laudable effort behind the production of the book, from the perspective of aesthetics. (Note well the overall design of the book, and its impressive cover art.)

As a whole nevertheless, the author has a keen, well-trained eye for his insights. One thing for sure, he does not hesitate to employ the human sciences in his theological reflection; after all, disciplines such as sociology and environmental studies have long since been dialogical partners with theology by now. The award given to the book also highlights Fr. Recepcion's faith as a prophet, his hope as a professor, and his compassion as a pastor. The result is a substantial and solid work, a most welcome contribution to the literature of missiology and of pastoral theology (contextualized, at that).

With already more than five centuries of Christianity, our country the Philippines plods on more than ever in her mission in the global stage. This superb compendium is very much aligned with – and even more, is very well in the front

line of – missiology studies. At the same time, it also positions our nation within the spectrum of a global, polyhedral world at once diverse and united. In such an intensely universal platform, the urgency of theological reflection and dialogue is most strongly felt: not inside a narrow tunnel, as it were, but indeed in the vast horizon of a global (catholic) Church. It is truly a pleasant surprise to see how a local university publication can go beyond what could have been constricted confines. Finally, to use the imagery of the book’s title, we are led to navigate our islands onto the crucial crossroads of Christian mission.

**100 Great Catholic Poems**

Edited and with commentary

by Sally Read

Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2023

*Fr. Martin Macasaet SDB, SThD*

Anyone perhaps who picks up this book will most probably browse at once through its pages, hoping to find a poem or two – which, of course, he or she has learned in Catholic school perhaps, in English Literature class. Maybe also, priests or nuns might look for those familiar verses which they may be using as a substitute to the hymn for Compline. Well, all of them may be rewarded with the help of this excellent anthology. However, let us say this at once, to use it merely as though a reference book would be doing it a great disservice. It would be undervaluing its worth and potential.

Quite simply, it is not just a mere compilation of poems. The editor (herself an accomplished British Catholic poet) meticulously curated, introduced, and commented on each of the one hundred poems in the volume. And if only for such an effort, this book deserves a place in a theological library. Even more basically, in the bookshelf of any well-educated Catholic.

One may even do a test, for that matter. Take Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*, or Gerard Manley Hopkins' *God's Grandeur*, both found in this collection, of course. Understandably, we insist on the *de rigueur* consideration of the respective commentaries of these two popular poems. One's appreciation for both poems will surely increase significantly, upon reading the editor's introductions to them, no matter how one may already be familiar with the poems. Sally Read in fact more than adequately justifies their inclusion, and points to their beauty and worthiness.

Indeed, the introductions and commentaries to the individual poems are the strong suits of this anthology. Reading them is highly recommended and mandatory, even studying them. We can say that without them, the compilation will simply remain just that: a mere subjective compilation. If it were so, there would not be any need for this book in the first place. In this day and age of the Internet, it is so easy and convenient to search for and obtain whichever poem you may be in need of. Nevertheless, a book like this still has an important value, particularly insofar as it is admirably done.

We know that we are in good hands, as a matter of fact. Sally Read is more than qualified and credible in her rendering us the service of editorship. As a poet herself, she knows fully well the vicissitudes too of literature, religion, theology, and spirituality. Her biography included in the dust jacket shows this. Interestingly, her conversion journey from atheism to the Catholic faith even seems to make her advantageously knowledgeable.

Connected with this last point is a note we can make, concerning a particular element which may be a factor in the anthology. There is quite a good number of poems which have been included in this collection, written by poets who were converts to the Catholic Faith (e.g. Thomas Merton, Wallace Stevens, Raissa Maritain, and several others). Read points this out, in fact: “[M]ore than a third of the poems in this book are written by converts.” Might this be an instance (on Read’s part) of giving in to what may possibly be an indulgent self-projection? We can never know for sure, of course. (She does have something to say about the feminist question – see “The Female Voice” on pages xxxvii-xxxviii.) But even if it were so (let us just say for the sake of argument), it only goes to show precisely the *catholicity* which the anthology also represents: nothing is so narrow or limited as to be excluded, and a wider scope affords the possibility of inclusion.

The editor moreover gives us in fact a fine example of the poetic craft, for which the poems she included are obviously proofs. As can be seen in her Introduction, these are surely farthest from arbitrary choices dumped together between the covers of the book. She carefully explains the three key concepts of the title (thus avoiding that it ends up a cliché): *poem*, *Catholic*, and *great*. Because of this, we are not only able to manage our expectations. As a matter of fact, we are led beyond such expectations of ours, and we are deeply satisfied.

And yet, one who is looking for a theological category or heading under which to put this anthology might be momentarily stumped. But the territory of theology has already long since been enlarged, thankfully. The *via pulchritudinis* in theology and spirituality can be strewn with plants and flowers of all kinds, including for sure literary works, most especially poetry. And of course, how can we forget? – no less than the Bible itself, with the many literary genres available in its contents, is a most direct example. The psalmist cannot help it: “My heart overflows with noble words. / To the king I must speak the song I have made; / my tongue as nimble as the pen of a scribe” (Ps 45:2). Obviously therefore, this book.

But perhaps we should still give in to certain second thoughts about it. It is not a nice poetry anthology for the general reading public (even if Catholic). Nor is it for the purpose of cutting a fashionable figure, for displaying some semblance of cultural-theological-spiritual erudition. Unfortunately, perhaps poetry is still largely exclusive territory, something esoteric and only for a few capable ones. And the well-known maxim applies not only anymore to the poet, but to the person on the street as well: that poems do not bring bread to the table.

But then, all the more reason for this book in such a case. According to Sally Read, “This anthology is aimed at those

who want to know more about poetry but may feel bewildered by it, as well as those who read poetry regularly or write it and study it" (p. 10). Indeed, it can serve at the very least, as a most suitable introduction to the art and craft of poetry, from a clearly Catholic perspective. Poetry, after all, is "the language of Catholicism" (as is quoted in the dust jacket of the book). The book renders some two thousand years of poetry ever fresh, representing the wide-ranging Catholic tradition, thus conveniently providing a festive buffet spread for a wide variety of tastes. We doubt if any other attempt can match what it attains successfully.

To append a particular observation, incidentally: we truly appreciate the book especially for its aesthetic qualities (as if the poems themselves contained were not yet beautiful enough). Ever consistent in terms of its output, the Word on Fire Catholic Ministries has produced and given us another gem from its canon of high-quality publications. In particular, the cover art is worth noting. It features an enlarged detail from a noted Renaissance painting (*The Madonna of the Magnificat*, by Sandro Botticelli). In fact, what is enlarged and focused is precisely the hand of our Blessed Mother, holding a pen and dipping it in an inkwell. And in a wonderful instance of alignment and consistency (the poems are chronologically arranged, by the way), the very first poem featured in this anthology is that of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, her timeless *Magnificat*. In the cover painting, that opening word of her canticle is clearly readable. Indeed, what a splendid way to simultaneously attract and deepen, embellish and nourish.

Far from just being a devotional tool, *100 Great Catholic Poems* is an outstanding and useful resource for theology. Christian writers and Catholic preachers will see its pastoral potential too (especially for New Evangelization), thanks to its obvious artistic and literary merits. By means of it, not only theology itself is enriched with the poetic wisdom ranging

from the Bible to Aquinas, from the literary giants (Chaucer, Dante) to the mystics (John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila), from modern masters (Gerard Manley Hopkins) to female contemporary poets (Denise Levertov). Nay more, literature as well is further enhanced with a defining dimension, that of Catholic poetry. Whether one agrees or not with Read's curation and commentary is not as important as what this anthology contains. For us, this book can very well be as though that distinctive feature of the Catholic Church, a sacrament: a vessel of grace, meant to help us rise onto the realm of the Triune God.