

The Philippine diaspora: Everywhere in the world

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Travel anywhere in the wealthy world—to North America, Europe or the Middle East—and you will soon find people from the Philippines. You may not actually see them, because many work in menial or invisible jobs, often in hotels and restaurants—positions where travelers scarcely notice them. So common are Filipina women as maids and nannies that the word *Filipina* has become the generic Italian term for a woman domestic. In the worst cases, as in the Middle East, Filipino people suffer real degradation. Migrant workers face sexual exploitation, and some encounter real religious persecution.

Yet the West pays next to no attention to the sufferings of these very poor people. And that invisibility is a special tragedy, because if you don't see these Filipino migrants, you are missing one of the great stories in contemporary Christianity.

Philippine Christianity dates back to the first truly global empire, that of the Spanish. In 1579 the bishopric of Manila was founded under the authority of Mexico City. In modern times, the country's population has boomed, and the present population of 96 million is expected to swell to 150 million by 2050. The Philippines is already home to more than 4 percent of the world's Christians. The nation is a vital heartland of the Roman Catholic Church, with the world's third-largest Catholic population. In any given year, the Philippines accounts for more Catholic baptisms than France, Spain, Italy and Poland combined.

That continuing Catholic strength demands explanation. In many ways, the religious culture of the Philippines looks very much like that of Latin American countries that in recent years have witnessed an explosive growth in evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Yet the Philippine Catholic Church has suffered no such mass defections, nor are any on the horizon. That is because Catholic authorities have devised highly effective ways to channel and build on popular religious enthusiasm.

If the Philippine Catholic Church cannot beat Pentecostals—and the Latin American experience suggests it can't—then it must join them. It does this through a series of lay organizations and societies that draw wholly on charismatic worship styles but remain within the church's very big tent. Whether by design or accident, these organizations have proved uniquely suitable for preserving the faith among a global diaspora.

Several such charismatic orders operate both within the Philippines and around the world, including *Bukas Loob Sa Diyos* ("Open in Spirit to God") and Couples for Christ. Perhaps the most widespread globally is El Shaddai, founded in 1984 by Brother Mike Velarde. This group claims some 7 million members in the Philippines, where it has long been a significant political force. The group's style is thoroughly Pentecostal, with a heavy dose of theories about spiritual warfare.

Although he remains within the Catholic orbit, Brother Mike acts much like a classic megachurch preacher or televangelist, and El Shaddai meetings are highly revivalist. Believers are encouraged to rely directly on God's favor. Those attending the meetings—mainly poor, predominantly female—hold passports in the air in the hope that they will be able to find work in foreign countries. Some hold umbrellas upside down as a symbolic statement of the blessings they hope to receive. Always, they seek healing in mind and body.

Many Western Christians have a difficult time taking the prosperity gospel seriously, and it certainly lends itself to abuse. Brother Mike has no shortage of critics. For poor believers, though, the heart of Christian faith is the sense of absolute dependence on God, and direct gratitude for all the good things of life. Shared church membership also provides a vital organizational structure with immense real-world benefits. El Shaddai operates in 30 countries, with chapters loosely attached to regular Catholic parishes. To understand why this framework matters, imagine a Filipina traveling to Los Angeles, to London, to Singapore, to Dubai, always on short-term visas and contracts and with little opportunity to meet native residents on any terms of equality. Life instead revolves around the instant community provided within the parallel structures of the church and the charismatic society.

The Philippine diaspora's kind of story is a familiar one in Christian history: believers wander far from their homelands, settling in communities with alien languages and faiths and usually getting little respect. But they find mutual support and encouragement in churches and small groups until the time comes for them to move on to a new country with a new set of languages and strange customs. They know

that even there they will find a Christian community with which they can gather for worship and healing. Isn't that the story of the book of Acts?