

Behind the canonization of the second Philippine saint

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The Roman Catholic Church is currently in the midst of foisting a second saint on the working class and youth of the Philippines. Pedro Calungsod, canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 21, 2012, is being promoted as the patron saint of the country's 2 million overseas contract workers. He is being peddled as an example for youth, encouraging them to join the church's evangelization drive among its own adherents.

The church's official story runs thus: Calungsod was a young lay catechist who joined the 1668 Spanish proselytizing mission to the Marianas Islands, hundreds of miles away from his native Visayas in the central Philippines. The mission led by Jesuit priest, Fr. Diego De San Vitores, initially met with success. According to Vitores, in the first year alone, over 13,000 native Chamorro were baptized. Stiff opposition emerged, however, after an exiled Chinese criminal, who had been stranded in the islands, accused the mission of killing babies through the use of baptismal water. The opposition turned violent and, in 1672, Calungsod, along with the mission leader himself, San Vitores, were killed by apostate natives, one of whom was a father who had become enraged after Vitores had baptized his daughter without his consent. Calungsod was 17 years of age at his death.

Calungsod's death 'for his faith' qualified him for martyrdom. Over 300 years later, in 2000, he was beatified by Pope John Paul II, thus reaching the first rung of sainthood. In 2003, a miracle was finally found for Calungsod—a woman came out of a coma after her physician apparently prayed to Calungsod to intercede. This qualified the candidate for sainthood. In 2011, the Vatican declared the so-called miracle as proven, paving the way for his canonization last year.

Calungsod's promotion to sainthood is not, of course,

based on a miracle. Rather, it is an intensely political act. The Roman Catholic Church is a reactionary prop of bourgeois rule in the Philippines and internationally. It uses the false hope offered by its medieval obscurantist ideology to divert the extreme social tensions generated by the deepening crisis of capitalism.

A new saint, particularly a young one, is viewed as a means of buttressing the church. Many Catholics in the Philippines take a very pragmatic approach to religion, ignoring what they regard as the "unpractical" tenets of official Catholicism. This is commonly described as seeking "their own relationship with God" and, in effect, erodes the political significance and influence of the official church.

This and other practices accounts for the results of survey after survey indicating that, despite the rigorous insistence of church officials that the use of contraceptives violates the fundamental tenets of Catholicism, Filipino Catholics, by a large majority, support the public distribution of contraceptives.

Since the 1990s, the church has been conducting a "New Evangelization" drive to shore up the doctrinal understanding and loyalty of Catholics. The canonization of Calungsod emerged out of that period and is part of a campaign to draw the youth in the Philippines and internationally to participate in the evangelization drive as catechists.

Pope John Paul II in his 2000 beatification speech for Calungsod declared: "Young people today can draw encouragement and strength from the example of Pedro, whose love of Jesus inspired him to devote his teenage years to teaching the faith as a lay catechist."

However, the actual story of Calungsod points to the role of the Roman Catholic Church then and today. In contrast to church propaganda depicting the Spanish

mission to the Marianas Islands as peaceful and Calungsod as a victim, the church was functioning as one arm of Spanish colonial policy. The other was the army.

The Spanish conquest of the Marianas was a particularly protracted and bloody affair. It involved a genocide that nearly exterminated the entire population. The fighting began in 1668 when the Jesuits and their soldier bodyguards landed in the Marianas and proceeded to insist that their new converts dismantle their own culture.

The ensuing conflict, which spanned over 25 years, is known as the Spanish-Chamorro Wars. The fighting, along with the diseases brought by the Spaniards, led to the near extinction of the Chamorro people. Vitores estimated the islands' population to number 100,000; by 1741 the number had dropped to less than 5,000.

No mention of this genocide is made in any church document on Calungsod. Instead, according to the church primer, the "Great War" in Guam, which it claims started on September 11, 1671 between the missionaries and the pagan natives, ended with "the victory of the missionaries, the establishment of peace and the resumption of the mission."

The political purpose behind the elevation of Calungsod to sainthood is not dissimilar to that of the Spanish mission: it is to inculcate submission and sacrifice to counteract the rebelliousness and resistance, particularly of young people, to the intolerable conditions produced by the 21st century crisis of capitalism.

During last November's lavish celebration of Calungsod's canonization, held in Cebu city, Archbishop Emeritus of Cebu Ricardo Vidal, who is credited with initiating the canonization of Calungsod, called on the working class to "learn to wait, to be patient and to work hard every day. What is faith if not to wait and trust on God? What is patience but being industrious every day, doing good for others?"

Philippine President Benigno Aquino III delivered a similar message to the gathering. He praised Calungsod for serving God "without question or doubt, without considering how much hardship he would have to go through." The president called for a "sense of selfless sacrifice for faith and principle; an outward offering of oneself for the greater good."

From Aquino's standpoint it was particularly apt that

the church had chosen Calungsod as the patron saint of overseas contract workers. Amid the worsening global economic downturn, Philippine capitalism is increasingly dependent on the billions of dollars in remittances sent back home by young workers from their often menial and oppressive jobs overseas.



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