Chapter 8

The Prosperity Gospel among Filipino Catholic Charismatics

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Introduction

Although the Philippines remains overwhelmingly Catholic, the growing popularity of Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and charismatic Catholicism has become a major current in the religious scene. El Shaddai, a popular and now global Catholic charismatic group based in Manila, 1 is the largest of the Catholic charismatic groups in the Philippines today. The prosperity gospel features prominently in El Shaddai’s appeal.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter explores the discursive transformations that make El Shaddai’s prosperity theology appealing to its Roman Catholic adherents. It shows how a revaluation of the socioeconomic self within society often occurs alongside spiritual renewal. Deliberate and critical reflections on aspects of lifestyle and mainstream Roman Catholicism accompany this new model of self. This personal change takes shape within new narratives of life trajectories and aspirations through both a reassessment of personal conditions of poverty and an orientation toward individual rather than societal transformation.

After giving a brief background of the El Shaddai movement, I describe the main features of its prosperity message. I then show how El Shaddai’s mostly lower-middle-class and aspiring middle-class Catholic members put the prosperity gospel to practice by reframing overly determined discourses of class and poverty to create alternative understandings of self and a renewed sense of personal agency. In my conclusion I note that the shift in orientation toward an individualistic view of prosperity has produced some ideological
friction with the more collectively oriented strands of the Philippine Catholic Church.

**Background**

El Shaddai is one among many renewal groups in the Philippines. While the percentage of Filipinos who identify themselves as Catholics in the Philippines has remained largely stable at around 81 percent since at least the 1940s, charismatics (Pentecostals and charismatics in Catholic or mainline Protestant denominations) and Pentecostals (people who belong to Pentecostal churches) have accounted for an increasing segment of the Christian population since the 1970s.

According to an extensive 2006 nationwide survey, 19 percent of all Christians in the Philippines are involved in the Pentecostal or charismatic renewal (15 percent of all Catholics and 39 percent of all non-Catholics). Because of the Catholic majority, this means that the renewal movement is largely a Catholic one, as 70 percent of all renewalists are Catholic in the Philippines. The Pew Research Center’s multination survey done in the same year offered slightly different but equally striking results. It found that 44 percent of the Philippines population is now part of the renewal movement (4 percent are Pentecostal and 40 percent are charismatic). The same study found comparable distributions in Brazil and Guatemala, with charismatics accounting for a large portion of the renewal movement in each country, possibly due to the presence of large Catholic charismatic groups.

El Shaddai began in 1984 as a nondenominational Christian radio program in Manila; within a few years it described itself as a Catholic lay group, in keeping with the affiliation of its founder and the majority of its followers. Within fifteen years, the group had become a substantial movement with a followership in the millions. The group has chapters in nearly every province in the Philippines and in almost forty countries, with overseas participation comprising around 30 percent of the total followership. The group is best known for its massive outdoor Saturday night rallies in Manila, which attract a half million to a million followers each week. These “prayer and healing rallies,” which feature emotional preaching by “Brother Mike” Velarde, the group’s charismatic founder and “servant-leader,” are broadcast on television and radio throughout the country. Tapes of Velarde’s sermons circulate widely among Filipino overseas workers, as do El Shaddai monthly magazines and newsletters. Neighborhood chapters hold weekly prayer meetings in barrio locations, which are usually led