

Christ as Tahanan: Re-appropriating Christ in the Context of Urban Street Dwellers

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to re-appropriate the identity of Christ as Tahanan in the context of Filipino Urban Street Dwellers. By doing Christology in a cultural perspective, the researchers were able to relate the identity of Jesus as a Tahanan that gives comfort to the urban street dwellers. This Tahanan is not a house but the loving comfort of Jesus to their lives. There is a place (tahanan) for them to cry on and be pacified “tahan” afterward. From the experience of rejection comes the experience of belongingness, from despair to hope, from retaliation to forgiveness, disharmony to peace, and hostility to reconciliation. These contrasting experiences make us feel at ease and comfortable. The inner disposition of happiness and fulfillment comes out from “kalooban ng tao”. This is what is called “ginhawa”, relief from both physical and inner suffering.

Keywords: Christology, Filipino Urban Street Dwellers, Religion, Tahanan

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Introduction

Homelessness now has been evident in many places in the world. Many governments neglect the poor. The Philippines alone has 4.5 million homeless people due to poverty, human trafficking, domestic violence, and natural disasters. Some families are categorized as “families of the street” – who have lived in the streets for a long time and have created community among themselves. They live a life like any other, but without a proper house and doing the chores on the streets. Most of them reside in *kariton* or *barung-barong* (makeshift houses) (Meribole, 2020). Their presence would show the real face of poverty in their life as they strive to live continuously.

Resulting from dynamic interactions between individualistic reasons and structural changes, homelessness has become one of the social issues our government and the Church attend to. Tested by trials in life combined with such structural changes could result in family’s homelessness. Structural factors include income poverty, inadequate social service coverage, and inaccessible housing markets. Whereas under individualistic reasons are personal characteristics of homeless persons. Homelessness is a consequence of a personal problem. The main reasons are loss of income and livelihood, family feuds, house demolition, and disasters. Aside from these two classifications, they opt to stay in the city because the place provides them means to survive daily.

The COVID-19 pandemic is worsening the urban poor’s condition in the Philippines. Street dwellers in Metro Manila, in particular, were forced by the authorities to leave the streets for them to avoid the disease. In response to this, non-government organizations, to alleviate their suffering, offered them temporary shelter. Catholic schools in the Manila area offered their facilities. However, due to the preparation for the opening of classes, it stopped catering to them. They returned to the streets to live there.

Among the groups and institutions that help the poor is the Kalinga Center; it received an order to shut down on many occasions because of alleged quarantine violations. The center is a shelter for the homeless run by the Arnold Janssen Kalinga

Foundation that provides housing and food for 400 individuals during the lockdown. In an interview, Junior Milan said that they could not go home since they did not have a home. He is more comfortable in the streets than in the walled space. When asked about the possibility of having the disease, he only laughed and said that the poor are lucky; since they are already immune to it, the disease seemed to have no power to infect them. (Lucenio, 2020)

In Jesus’ love for the poor, he inspires and calls his disciples to partake in this particular mission. Numerous people are responding to His call, animated by his love, and these individuals extend help through voluntary work and financial assistance to various institutions that have this charisma. These institutions work collaboratively with one another to meet the quality of service of Christ Himself set. Catholic schools and religious congregations join hands for the mission. The Congregation of the Passion of Christ and the Society of the Divine Word, through Arnold Janssen Bahay Kalinga commit themselves to fulfill their vision-mission to serve as a beacon of hope for Metro Manila’s homeless and poorest of the poor. It envisions a society where nobody is left behind and the dignity of all people is upheld, secured, respected, and celebrated. In this way, the lives of the homeless and wounded are re-created and empowered. AJ Bahay Kalinga provides food, showers, and shelter for the urban street dwellers. Concretization of Jesus’ invitation in Mt 25:35-36, “when I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger you welcomed me, I was naked you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me”.

“Tahanan” in the Filipino Context

When we speak of the word house, we are sometimes misconstruing it to the word home. In the Filipino translation, “house” means “bahay”, referring to the structure that gives shelter to people or family. On the other hand, the word “home” or “tahanan” in the Philippines implies a deep sense of the relationship between all the members of the family living together in one house. “Tahanan” from the root word “tahan,” which means to cease or stop crying and the suffix “an,” that when attached to a noun, would often indicate place or

location. Tahanan is a place where each member of the family can cry and be consoled. The care that one needs for her/his well-being is provided here and can be welcomed and accepted despite what they have done. Thus, to fully comprehend the word “tahanan” means to understand one another’s filial relationship. Aside from that filial relationship, a deeper connection with one another leads to comfort and consolation.

Furthermore, with a particular Filipino “salawikain, the meaning it offers would complement with the first definition “tahan-an”. “Aanhin mo pa ang bahay na bato kung ang nakatira ay kuwago, mabuti pa ang isang kubo na ang nakatira ay tao.” This would imply that for Filipinos, there is a great importance when it comes to the way of relating with other members of the family or with the people they are living with. Filipinos still uphold the possession of the basic goodness of a person. For this, they strive to live up to their identity as a person on their “pagpapakatao”. It is a place where “kagandahang-loob” is being developed and shared. Then, in sharing for the well-being of the other, all will be transformed. Mula sa pagiging “ka-loob” (identity/basic goodness) tungo sa pagiging “kalooob” (gift) ni Kristo” (Miranda, 2003).

Since “Tahanan” is considered a house, too, different parts of the house can also be viewed as a representation of Filipino concept of “Tahanan”. The “tarangkahan” and “bakuran”, fence or gate including the yard, or the door itself, signifies security and comfort zone for the dwellers. It may also signify openness, a welcoming attitude, and a place of leisure and recreation. The “balkonahe” and “salas”, balcony and living room, are the places for gatherings and entertainment – a place where we can express hospitality and to be comfortable with one another (magkapalagayan ng loob). The “hapag kainan/comedor” and “kusina”, dining area and kitchen, aside from being the place of refreshment to fill their hungry stomachs, is also a place of “damayan” or socialization and openness to one another of the family. The “silid-tulugan”, bedroom, is a place of rest for everyone. Not all families have the same size of the house nor have all parts of the house present, but each house tries to have its own space, even how small it will be, to represent all mentioned parts.

The urban poor has their own concept of “tahanan”, where being houseless is not comparable to being homeless. In interviews conducted, the street dwellers looked not much on what they lack but on what they have as a family. For them, the family they have is what makes them feel at home. One said that “ang tahanan ito yung lugar kung saan kasama mo yun pamilya mo, yun walang iniisip na problema, walang ganitong hirap, may hirap pero masaya” (Tahanan is the place where you are with your family, there is no problem to think about, there is no such difficulty, there is a hardship, but it is fun). Another also mentioned that, “Wala kaming matirahan sir eh, dahil wala kaming pera. Kaya simula pa noon sa kalye na kami nakatira at masaya naman. Kahit maingay, magulo, mabaho, sanayan na lang sir. Ganito ang buhay namin, wala na kaming magagwa. Kaysa naman nasa maayos na buhay yung iba nag iingitan pa, nag aaway-away pa. Eh dito sa kalye, libreng libre kami at walang nagmamay-ari.” (We don’t have a place to live, sir, because we don’t have money. So since then, we have been living on the street and have been happy. Even if it’s noisy, messy, smelly, practice sir, this is our life, and we can do nothing. Rather than in a good life, the others are still jealous, still fighting. Here on the street, we are free, and no one owns it.)

In the context of urban street dwellers, “tahanan” is more about having a good life, faith in God, and a happy family despite the lack of material things, especially a house. They chose to live in the streets rather than have a proper home yet full of problems and misunderstandings. With the conducted interviews regarding Tahanan, it is where they can be happy with their loved ones and be contented. Besides being content, they also elaborated that there is no competition, envy, and jealousy. In Tahanan, they encounter difficulties and problems but are in the realm of happiness. The place where they live is not the kind of home that many people know. They pointed out that they have no money to provide a decent house for their family because of their economic and social status. Nevertheless, even though they live in the streets, they receive blessings from other people and God as they continuously trust in Jesus.

The hope of the street dwellers is no longer to have a house to live in but to always be with their family despite their situation. Their faith in Jesus

Christ as their God helped them continue in their journey in the streets. Confinement in shelters would somehow affect their own idea of “tahanan” which is about being with the family and having one another. The comfort and confidence they have in Jesus as they pray to keep them sane and content with what they have, even if there comes the point where even food is not available. They hope that one day, the hardships they have will be rewarded when the time comes that they will be facing Jesus in the heavenly home, bringing nothing but their unfailing trust in Jesus.

The Homeless Christ

Christ himself experienced homelessness when he said in reply to his follower, “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk. 9:58; Mt. 8:20). This passage poses an image of the would-be followers of Jesus who had no place to rest, depicting Jesus as often without a house to stay in (Paglia, 2015). It is also common that the narratives on Jesus depict him always on the streets and remains with the homes who accept him. Even when Jesus sent his apostles and followers, he reminded them to bring peace to the house that will accept them and listen to the words they proclaim (Mt. 10: 13; Mk. 6:10; Lk. 9:4; 10:6). The identity of Jesus as homeless, in the context of this paper, is not about having no home or “tahanan”, but more on having no house or “bahay”. Jesus’ message of no place to lay his head would mean a place to stay in, and looking at Jesus’s experience, he always has someone to be with. Thus, Jesus’s houselessness was countered by his feeling of being at home because of his disciples and people who trusted and followed him. Though Jesus’ homelessness here is not due to poverty but rather stems from his commitment to proclaim God’s Kingdom, it is noteworthy that his being homeless is characterized by a personal decision. Being homeless, therefore, comes from various reasons.

Whenever Jesus is welcomed by followers in the street or invited by people in their homes, hospitality is seen and could summarize all the factors that we may feel or encounter whenever we are at home – taken care of, entertained, having a rest, being close with the family, and the likes.

It is evident that feeling at home is an experience of having a family. Family is where one can feel complete despite the lack of access to basic necessities in daily living. Hospitality would mean a lot in terms of being at home. Being considered as part of the marginalized, Jesus and most of his followers are always in a destitute situation but still strive to be as hospitable as they can whenever they see hope in people. In the Old Testament, this kind of hospitality can be likened to the experience of Jesus or those people who welcome him.

Hospitality is one of the significant features of a home that has been given much emphasis in the Book of Joshua. Rahab helped two men who were pursued by the king and hid them to save their lives even though she did not know them (Joshua 2:3-5). Clearly, Rahab saw in these men herself who is also in need of someone who would welcome and accept her in the community. She, being described as a harlot, is interpreted as one who represents a marginalized group of people. She renders service to the rich and powerful living under the protection of the great wall of Jericho. In order to feed and give her family shelter, she has to do such a lowly job. She carries the stigma of such a scapegoat, which in Jewish tradition implies that the community despises her (The International Bible Commentary). A scapegoat is designated by the high priest to carry the sins of the community into the wilderness, bearing all the inequities, ready to die there alone from starvation (ancient.hebrew.org). Receiving the spies sent by Joshua may put herself in a dreadful situation. Rahab’s hospitality toward the two men means defying the king of Jericho, who ordered his emissary to bring those men out of her house, for the king assumed already that they would come unto her place. Furthermore, her utterance of faith to YHWH (Joshua 2:11) adds to the gravity of her action against the king. Renouncing the authority of her country’s political leader and taking the side of foreigners is equivalent to having no home. She is fully aware of it; that is why she continues, “Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father’s house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death” (Joshua 2:11-13). God grants her petition, and she obtains true membership with

the Lord's chosen people. She is found to belong in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

Since hospitality and being at home are closely related to one another as a form of dependence on others, the discourse on having a home is seen as an image of a family. In the gospels, we may see the extension of Jesus' family from biological to relational with the Father. When the crowd prompted Jesus to look at his mother and brothers, he pointed to his disciples, reiterating that his family is those who follow the will of the Father in heaven (Mt. 12:46-50; Mk. 3:31-35; Lk. 8:19-21). The message of Jesus is not about rejecting his mother and brothers but extending the family to those who are worthy to be called as such. This is a clear image of the giving the meaning to the family as a home, since Jesus experienced being a prophet without honor in his own town (Mt. 13:54; Mk. 6:4; Lk. 4:24). When Christ speaks of his family, he speaks of the people close to him in terms of following and doing the will of the Father. This closeness, being part of Jesus' so called "extended family" is bringing the idea of home outside of a structure. Being at home now in Jesus' context is not in terms of having a house but of having a family – having the comfort of being complete despite of the deficiencies in material aspects.

Christ as "Tahanan"

Christ as Tahanan is meant not as a place of abode but a state of life despite the sufferings experienced by street dwellers. This state of life is an experience of being complete despite lacking resources, even basic needs. Christ is depicted as without a permanent place to stay in, as the gospels narrate, but there is a presence of completeness in his life. His dependence on God made him comfortable with life, even if many tribulations were thrown at him.

The experience of homelessness of the street-dwellers shows a concrete example of trusting in the Divine providence as how Jesus did. They look at Jesus as a sign of hope – shedding light on the darkness of their situation. Jesus' presence in their lives through faith helps them to strive more and be hopeful of what is to come. The image of Christ as "Tahanan" is found in the gospel with his

invitation, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-30). Jesus' invitation incorporates all the descriptions of "tahanan" in the Filipino context – comfort and security, openness and hospitality, refreshment and socialization, and being with trusted people.

The comfort and security brought by Christ is a combination of consolation and assurance (secured). These feelings are always present to people who utter the name of Christ by saying "suskupo/juskupo" (Hesus ko po/Diyos ko po). When one utters it, it shows the dependency on Christ as the one who will hearken to their cries and supplications. This can also be seen in Jesus' care for the least when he relates to himself that whatever we do to the least of his brethren, we did it to him (Mt. 18:10). The openness and hospitality of Christ can be seen in many instances in the gospel narratives, where he welcomes people without prejudice. He welcomes the rich and those with political and military affiliations; much more, he welcomes those who are marginalized, especially the poor, widow, children, and the sick. Jesus' openness corresponds to his hospitable identity in catering to the requests, even those outside of God's chosen people. His presence as the refreshment and communion (socialization) emphasizes his identity as the bread of life and the living water. Jesus speaks of himself as the living water (Jn 7:37) who will quench the thirst in faith and the bread of life that whoever believes in him shall not hunger and will never thirst (Jn 6:35). Jesus also shows his identity as a great provider when he fed the multitude of people following him (Mt. 13-21; Mk. 6:34-44; Mk. 8:1-9), indicating communion and socialization with one another. The context of Jesus being with the homeless trusting in him exemplifies the words of Jesus, where there are two or more gathered in his name, he is there in their midst (Mt. 18:20). This communion and gathering together with Christ lead to trusting other people despite their situation.

Christ as "Tahanan" also indicates Jesus being our go-to person, someone whom we can lean and rely on whatever challenge we face in life. Jesus is the one who is always present for people to be consoled (tahan/tumahan) and a great consoler of

our spiritual needs. Looking at Jesus as “Tahanan” leads us to rely deeply on our faith in God. Street dwellers might always feel something lacking in them, especially the presence of the house, but the presence of Jesus as their “Tahanan” would mean a lot in response to their great faith in God.

Conclusion: Regauging: Strength and Limitations of Christ as “Tahanan”

The concept of Christ as “Tahanan” is basically a perception of the deepening faith and reliance on divine providence. This will give a deeper understanding of Christ’s presence, as St. Teresa of Avila said, “God alone suffices” (Solo Dios basta). As a Christology from below, this concept of Christ leads to the importance of faith in God through Jesus despite the challenges experienced by the homeless. The faith they express is a manifestation of their own experience of suffering covered by comfort and consolation given by Christ. The image of tahanan (home) gives them Jesus as the one who will give hope to them.

This idea of Jesus as “Tahanan” is also subject to more scrutiny because the basis is the experience of the street dwellers. Whereas, despite having a house and being with the biological family, there are still people who have the same feeling of homelessness because of the absence of the concept of “tahan” and family in their lives. This concept may also lead to the idea of salvation as “ginhawa” since Jesus’ image as “tahanan” also speaks of the earthly experience of “ginhawa”.

Primarily, children experience hospitality at home with their families. The security a home gives is the reason why members of the family go back whenever they encounter problems, suffering, and persecution outside the periphery of their home. There is a place (tahanan) for them to cry on and be pacified “tahan” afterward. From the experience of rejection comes the experience of belongingness, from despair to hope, from retaliation to forgiveness, disharmony to peace, and hostility to reconciliation. These contrasting experiences make us feel at ease and comfortable. The inner disposition of happiness and fulfillment comes out from “kalooban ng tao”. This is what is called “ginhawa”, relief from both

physical and inner suffering (de Mesa, 1987). In the case of parents encountering the same unpleasant realities in life, to whom can they talk and cry on? They cannot simply tell their children about their personal problems and difficulties. It is only in prayer that they are able to dialogue with God, whose presence is constant in them. This illustrates how each one can become “tahanan” from the experiences of urban street dwellers, the street, the park, the “kariton” the people offering hospitality, the earth, the cosmos is a home. Where Christ is present, there is our tahanan.

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