

***El Shaddai* and Inculturation**

LEONARDO N. MERCADO, SVD

El Shaddai is a huge and popular Filipino charismatic group with millions of followers in the Philippines and abroad. In 1997 it had 62 overseas chapters, made up mainly of Filipino overseas contract workers (OCWs). Within the Philippines it has a following of about six million members—seven million by one estimate (*Asiaweek* 1996:37). The Metro Manila flock gathers every Saturday at the reclaimed area of the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) grounds. In the afternoon people begin to arrive in all kinds of vehicles. These overnight gatherings can draw, even at a conservative estimate, one hundred thousand people, and possible as many as half a million. Three million gathered for *El Shaddai*'s eleventh anniversary in August 1994—one million less than the four million who gathered in Rizal Park in January of the same year for the Pope's mass, reportedly the biggest gathering of people in history.

Attendance levels are high even when weather conditions are not conducive. A group of 200,000 once braved Typhoon Mameng. The howling winds rendered their umbrellas useless. Wet and shivering, they stayed from 11:00 PM until 4:00 AM the following day.

What motivates people to persevere in such adverse conditions?

The big following of *El Shaddai* has attracted the attention of politicians and church people, including the Vatican. With his weight in getting potential votes, politicians and the military have dossiers about its charismatic leader, Mariano Z. Velarde—better known as Brother Mike.

What is the secret behind the *El Shaddai* phenomenon? Why does it outrank other charismatic groups in the Philippines?

Its founder and guru says that the answer to the phenomenon is Jesus Christ, whom he calls “the missing part.” In an address to the Rotarians of Manila, he said:

This, my dear brothers and sisters, is the secret of the *El Shaddai* phenomenon. People from all walks of life are discovering and receiving the “Missing Part” that money cannot buy: Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God that unlearned men are boldly proclaiming by the power of the Holy Spirit (*Velarde 1997:E-23*).

He calls Christ the “missing part” because leaders have neglected him in their “quest for national unity, peace and prosperity” (*Velarde 1997:E-23*).

But this Jesus is the same “product” which the other religious groups are trying to “sell.” So why does *El Shaddai* stand out and connect so well with Filipinos? Why do its followers stand six or seven hours during prayer meetings? Further, how Filipino is it? How does *El Shaddai* inculturate Christianity into the Philippine context? This study tries to answer these two inter-related questions, namely, the reason for the success of *El Shaddai* and its inculturation as Filipino.

It might help to understand this if we keep in mind that inculturation at its best comes from below (*Mercado 1997:3-19*). As Prior says, “We are now becoming increasingly aware that inculturation of worship and spirituality does not begin with church commissions, with experts and officials who decide what elements of local culture should be adapted to a framework imported from the West” (*Prior 1997:239*). The key to inculturation, Prior continues, is to “free the Bible from Western strictures and allow it to speak out in the lives of people, and they will then express their insights and struggles, their problems and aspirations in symbolic form, that is, in living faith and worship” (:241).

Historical Background

Asiaweek has named Mariano Z. Velarde as one of Asia’s 50 most powerful persons. He comes from humble beginnings in Catanduanes, in Bicol. His being a Bicolano explains his heavily accented Tagalog. Mike Velarde was a movie producer and a real-estate developer. He also gambled in Manila casinos and drank. His real estate business floundered.

He often recounts his conversion in his preaching. In 1978, at the age of 37, Mike Velarde read the Bible while he was waiting for heart surgery. He experienced a burst of faith and asked God for a second chance at health so that he could serve the Lord. He was spontaneously healed. In his own words, Velarde recalls:

My involvement in the renewal movement started when I was healed of heart enlargement and heart block at the Philippine Heart Center in 1978 without undergoing the proposed operation. There I received a revelation. Actually, a lady dressed in a nurse's uniform came into my room past midnight, and opened the Bible to me insisting that I read a passage [1 Cor. 10:13] in the Bible and it would help. Indeed, it did, because after that I was able to recompose myself in praying. The following morning, I was up on my feet (*Romulo 1996:40*).

So in 1981 he renewed his promise: "For as long as I have speech and life, I promise to proclaim the Good News of Yahweh *El Shaddai*!" (*Gamboa et al. 1995:14*).

He first served God through a Catholic charismatic movement in the archdiocese of Manila. He bought a property in Paranaque, the site of DWXI radio station. In the beginning Velarde just wanted to stay in the background and financially help the movement. "When I put up the *El Shaddai* DWXI-Prayer Partner Foundation, my intention of heading this ministry was only to channel through the foundation my financial support to various charismatic movements," recalls Velarde (*Velarde 1997:9-13*).¹

Four months after the start of his radio apostolate, he felt his efforts were useless because there was no feedback. Then he got a letter from a woman who had been suffering from migraine for seventeen years. She said that listening to the radio program while he prayed had cured her ailment. Although Mike Velarde never aired his possible stopping the broadcast, she requested him not to quit the radio apostolate (*Velarde 1992a:11*). After one week, more letters came from listeners. They praised and thanked God because they had heard the

¹ Many of the quotes in this study are taken from a personal interview with Mike Velarde on 23 June 1997. It was later published in *Ugnay-Diwa*, no. 18 (July-December 1997), pp. 9-13. Further quotes without endnotes mean that they are taken from the said interview.

life-giving Good News which gave them hope and a direction for life, and because of the cures they received.

He recalls the initial reaction of his radio listeners. "It all started there and people started to go to my office, telling me that miracles are taking place in their homes just by listening to the program" (*Romulo 1996:40*). After two years he established DWXI Prayer Partners Foundation.

He got the name *El Shaddai* from a magazine that a friend gave to him. The name intrigued him. The Old Testament has several names for God such as *El-Elohim*, *Yahweh*, *El Shaddai*. *Shaddai*, which has been inaccurately translated by the Septuagint as "The Almighty" (*pantokrator*), is better rendered as "The One of the Mountain." *El Shaddai* is the only name of God in the Old Testament where God is neuter with a feminine connotation (the God of breasts, that is, the one who gives nourishment). *El Shaddai* then is "The God Who is More Than Enough." God as *El Shaddai* is God who blesses, who does not punish, and is forgiving. Sometimes Mike Velarde uses both names: *Yahweh El Shaddai*.

El Shaddai as an organization was founded in August 1984 during his birthday "with a small flock of some 15 members, mostly friends, employees of his real-estate company, and neighbors" (*Nuguid 1996:5*).

Velarde explains its subsequent growth:

The Lord has a purpose. I did not expect all this. All over the world the response is tremendous. A parish priest in Vancouver said, this group is really different, it has enlivened the parish and is growing. Non-Filipinos have joined, Japanese in Japan. (*Doyo 1996:C4*).

During the seventh year of the ministry, however, there were three major setbacks, which Velarde (*1992a:23-30*) attributes to the devil. The first was financial. When the business climate went sour in 1984, he owed around 200 million pesos in loans. Some banks foreclosed on his properties mortgaged to them. He had to convert his office into an emergency residence for his family.

The second crisis followed the first. During the financial crunch, his wife asked him to stop the ministry. She threatened to leave him and go abroad with her four children.

The third crisis was more insidious. His trusted staff members of DWXI Radio deserted him. They sabotaged the equipment so that the radio was off the air for two months. Furthermore, the staff charged him with stealing 1.7 million pesos of the foundation fund. They blemished his reputation by news reports that hit the front page of the national dailies. These accusations in the dailies were timed to coincide with the *El Shaddai* Mass and healing rally at the Folk Arts Theater. The purpose was to discourage people from attending it.

Velarde attributes his overcoming these battles to the following factors:

- (1) I submitted myself to God Almighty. I did not fight back on my own, but on God's Word.
- (2) I submitted myself to the church and government authorities and refused to fight back....
- (3) I refused to do wrong despite the pressures brought upon me. (Velarde 1992a:30).

By 1988 his financial troubles were over. He recovered his assets and his role as founder of *El Shaddai* has actually improved his business. He owns the ADV Realty and Delta Broadcasting radio station, which owns DWXI and ranks third in over-all radio ratings. He also heads the *El Shaddai* Golden Rule Company. His wife did not leave him; but he promised to spend Sundays with his family. The miraculous cures and outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the rallies fanned popular support and overcame the black propaganda.

The Success and the Cultural Rootedness of *El Shaddai*

In my opinion, the following factors explain the tremendous following and success of *El Shaddai*: (1) the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit; (2) the attractive liturgy, (3) the effective use of communication; (4) the charisma and method of Mike Velarde; (5) the fact that *El Shaddai* answers the needs of the people; (6) the theology used; (7) the empowerment of the laity that it achieves; and (8) the use of Filipino symbols. These factors actually are facets of the same reality and therefore support each other. They are also aspects of Philippine inculturation.

Let us go over each factor.

The Emphasis on the Role of the Holy Spirit

Charismatic and Pentecostal movements are a feature of our times. In fact, Harvey Cox, a theologian based in Harvard, writes that the future of Christianity lies in Pentecostalism, and statistics support his view (Cox 1995). In recent history, charismatic, or pentecostal, movements have risen tremendously throughout the world.

What Cox describes as a universal phenomenon is certainly true of the Philippines, as can be seen by the fact that, in the Philippines, the Born Again and charismatic churches have come to greatly outnumber the long-established Protestant churches. *El Shaddai*, as a charismatic movement, is a part of this phenomenon.

Pentecostalism is built on what Cox calls “the recovery of primal speech” (:16). The kind of primal speech to which he refers appears to have survived in Filipino folk Christianity. Filipino Christians have built their Christianity over their original primal religion. Their popular devotions reflect the traditional ethnic religion. Notable examples are such phenomena as the devotions to Santo Nino and the Black Nazarene.

When we asked Mike Velarde about the main reason for the success of *El Shaddai*, he admitted he could not explain the phenomena. But he said:

The only simple explanation is that we firmly believe the Lord is at work in this ministry. What happened during the Acts of the Apostles is happening right here now. It seems that the Holy Spirit’s unction is moving within the ministry.

He continues: “My reading is that the *El Shaddai* movement is a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles. I think the Holy Spirit is no longer restrained.”

The Attractive Liturgy

When asked about what is wrong in the Catholic Church as it is at present, Velarde answered:

I would not say it’s wrong. I would say it’s what’s lacking inside the Church, because look at what’s happening with our regular Sunday Mass. Everybody is quiet. We just keep the priest by himself on the altar praying, and doing everything. The people

do not participate. Now here, at the *El Shaddai*, everybody participates. We pray together, we sing together. (Romulo 1996:40).

The traditional clerical regimentation of liturgy in many places has stifled lay participation. But not in *El Shaddai*: "We allow everybody to express their faith in God freely," says Velarde (:40). For the followers, this experience counts more than doctrine. The attractive liturgy of *El Shaddai*, says Bishop Bacani, "is a combination of good preaching and also the Filipino penchant for the dramatic." The *El Shaddai* prayer meetings are always emotional. If they are sad, they cry; if they are happy they laugh and shout. People are encouraged to be themselves. Since Filipinos are an emotional people and think concretely, the majority does not go for much intellectualizing. The down-to-earth testimonies of followers in their faith-sharing reach home. The strong sense of fellowship answers the followers' needs in their emotional woundedness.

The prayer meetings of *El Shaddai*, be they held at the PICC grounds or in parish assemblies, follow a similar pattern in their sequence, choice of songs, gestures, and sharing of personal experience. The parish units usually have between 20 to 50 followers who form a prayer group. They meet weekly for a prayer meeting and a mass. Visitors to these local prayer meetings are warmly welcomed and acknowledged before the gathering. The warm reception gives visitors a sense of belonging. Preachers trained by the *El Shaddai* Foundation give the input. These preachers follow the style of Mike Velarde. Each unit has a chairman.

The local prayer meeting usually starts with the participants prayerfully holding hands in a circle. Lively singing with actions follows this. The next part is the act of contrition, which is expressed in songs and prayers and followed by praise. Exclamations such as "Alleluia," "Praise the Lord," or "Amen" punctuate the proceeding. Personal contact such as hugging and holding hands are encouraged to manifest their oneness. Then comes the reading of the Word of God, followed by the preacher's sharing. More prayer, songs, praise, and the collection, follow. Towards the end are announcements and individual healing sessions.

The prayer services attract attendance from other religions. Most of them do not show their church membership. But some, like those from the Born-Again movements, show their IDs to Velarde. Many

Protestants also attend. The experience of the prayer meetings has encouraged some former Catholics to return to the fold. At the end of the liturgy of the word, Mike Velarde raises his hands in blessing. He makes the sign of the cross, perhaps as a Catholic compromise.

According to Covar, the liturgy of *El Shaddai* is a cross between Protestantism and Catholicism.² The manner of the songs, readings, and preaching has something similar to the Protestant counterpart in the prayer meetings. Many of the songs chosen are quite Protestant. The testimonies (*patotoo*) of the *El Shaddai* followers also have the flavor of Protestantism.

El Shaddai also has Muslim members and its main office also employs converts from Islam. Velarde says: "Our main objective is to unite." He opts for the unity of faiths. "It is my wish and prayer that one day we can come together in one massive demonstration of unity in faith. This will only be realized if all those who have been called to lead every ministry will forget themselves individually and work for unity" (*Gamboa 1995:19*).

"In Hong Kong many Buddhists converted to Christianity," reports Velarde. "This is because their Filipino domestic helpers who are *El Shaddai* members evangelize their children. The children in turn evangelize their parents. Several Buddhist families in Hong Kong have converted to our faith."

Every Easter Sunday, the service includes adult baptisms. They number between 80 to 120, and most of them come from other faiths. This is not to sound triumphalistic. An example may clarify the point. In Rome a Filipino woman, an overseas contract worker (OCW), worked as a governess of a nominal Catholic Italian family which had little time for prayer or for attending Sunday liturgy. She taught the children how to pray and go to church on Sundays. The children in turn convinced their parents to practice their Catholic faith. The parents were quite grateful to the OCW for their conversion, for their newly-found appreciation of spiritual values. The same phenomenon can be applied to other religions. A lax Christian in converting to Islam may become a better person through his newly-found faith. Therefore we

² From an interview with Dr. Prospero Covar (Dept. of Anthropology, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City), November 1995.

should think of the *μετανοια* (*conversioni*) of people from other religions to *El Shaddai* as a move to becoming better humans.

Effective Communication

El Shaddai has effectively tapped the use of mass media. In 1992, it started broadcasting on television, and currently broadcasts 14 hours of television time weekly in various channels all over the country. Television and radio beam the giant prayer rallies. In fact, during the huge rallies, the crowds take along their radio sets to follow the activities in the central stage. DWXI, the radio station rated third most popular in Metro Manila, broadcasts 24 hours daily. Other radio stations in the country also have *El Shaddai* programs.

Besides television and radio, *El Shaddai* has tapped the print media. It came out in 1986 with *Bagong Liwanag Magazine*. It prints the talks of Velarde, testimonies of members regarding graces received such as miraculous cures, blessings in business, overcoming of bad habits, and conversion. It distributes 300,000 copies per monthly issue. Since 1991, the movement started the *Miracle Newsletter* which reaches 150,000 copies per issue. Furthermore, Bro. Mike has written two monographs, *Mga Butil ng Gintong Aral ni El Shaddai* (a collection of modern parables preached in the prayer rallies) and *How to Win Your Battles All the Time*. All these publications are distributed worldwide free of charge.

It also distributes VHS and cassette tapes on *El Shaddai*. The testimonies of followers in other countries report on how these have effected cures.

Another effective communication is word of mouth. The infectious enthusiasm of the members attracts people. The people's testimonies in *El Shaddai* do not come across as scripted and memorized. They are convincing and win people over.

The Charisma and Method of Mike Velarde

Like any movement, *El Shaddai* identifies itself with the charism of its founder. Mike Velarde claims to be a servant leader and at the same time a servant of God. He projects himself as one with close contact with God from whom he receives messages. Velarde then brings the messages to the people.

Bishop Manuel Sobrevinas of the Imus diocese admits: "When I say Mass with the followers of *El Shaddai*, I feel 'envious' of Bro. Mike because I cannot do what he does. Just one word from him and the people are happy and awake. But when I speak, it seems that the people are sleeping" (*Bagong Liwanag Magazine* August 1994:37).

Even without any formal training, Mike Velarde seems to outdo priests. While people get bored if the priest preaches more than ten minutes in the Sunday homily, the followers of *El Shaddai* delight in hearing him preach for two or three hours. How does he do it? Velarde jokes a lot in his preaching. He touches the hearts of the people. He intersperses his talks with "*Ale-lu-yah, purihin ang Panginoon* [Praise the Lord]" which his followers repeat. If we can put a finger on the reasons for his success as an orator, the main ones are certainly his wise use of psychology and his showmanship. He claims that he is only an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and that whatever success he has should be attributed to God.

"Brother Mike's way of preaching is very well suited to the mentality and the needs of the people," says Bishop Teodoro Bacani, spiritual director of the Catholic charismatic renewal in the archdiocese of Manila. "He is making a new kind of preaching. I myself picked up something from him, like getting people to actively participate." For instance, Bro. Mike tells the crowd: "Repeat after me: 'Brother Mike, what is needed to do in order to be happy in life?'" Then he develops the topic. When there are quotations that he wants the people to memorize, he has them repeat them.

His speaking skills and interactive style keep people alert. He paces back and forth on the stage while speaking. He intersperses his talks with anecdotes and songs. He asks questions and the people answer; e.g., "I am handsome, am I not?" The crowd roars: "Yes!" He answers: "You said that, not I!" (Laughter). The people do not get bored with his dialogical style of preaching, in which people clap their hands, greet each other, enjoy the jokes, cry together, and take part actively by raising their hands or jumping together when told to.

Velarde usually develops five points in one hour. "I do not know of anyone who can keep a crowd of 300,000 standing and listening for two hours, and are not sleepy at all," says Bishop Bacani. "They are still willing to jump at the end of two hours. For me, that is fantastic homiletics!"

One of his approaches is the use of modern parables, as he has mentioned in his booklet (*Velarde, 1996*). Among his imageries are fingers, trashcans, soap, telephones, bottles, swords, ice, goats, smoke, seat-belts, etc. They are images that his audience can easily understand. Filipinos are used to the symbolical imagery of proverbs. He connects these parables with biblical quotations and corroborates them with personal testimonies.

Let us sample them. First is the parable of the soap. When bathing one must not hold on to the soap tightly lest it slip. It is enough to loosely hold it in the palm of the hand. *Application*: many precious things or persons (like children) ought not to be tightly possessed.

Next is the telephone. No amount of dialing or shouting will help if the telephone line is cut. One has to call the telephone company to connect the line. *Application*: we must re-establish our connection with God by accepting our sinfulness, by conversion and forgiving others, and by accepting Christ as the Lord of our lives.

Third is the medical prescription. After a medical check-up, the patient goes to buy medicine with the doctor's medical prescription. *Application*: God's medical prescription is the Bible.

In order to be seen from a distance during the huge prayer rallies, he wears jackets with loud colors.

During his talk on Holy Thursday, April 4, 1996, he told his hearers: "Something good will happen to me." He told the crowd to repeat it. After expounding on Mt. 7:9-11 that God is provident, that he is better than parents, Mike tells the crowd that Yahweh has blessed the water and eggs that they brought along. Then he tells the people to eat the eggs and drink the water with these words, "Something good will happen to me." He tells the people that those who drink the water and eat the eggs will get well. (I think this method was picked up from the Silva Method of self-suggestion – *Silva and Stone 1983*).

Another example is the prayer service of Good Friday, April 5, 1996. It was from 7:00 to 10:30 PM at the PICC grounds. The theme was the seven last words of Christ on the cross. On the text of Jn. 19:26-27 ("Behold your son; behold your mother"), he told the crowd to loudly say, "*Inay* [Mother]!" They did. "Say, *Inay, mahal kita!* [Mother, I love you]!" They did. Then he told the crowd to hold hands while they heard a sentimental song from the choir. Many cried, even the singers.

Mike then told the crowd to embrace each other, that is, those who were standing near to each other. Then he said that Jesus and Mary are inseparable. We must love Mary, our parents, and our enemies. Our country needs love. God is love. But he said that Mary is the mother of Jesus. She must remain human, not divine.

On the last words of Jesus on Calvary ("Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"), Mike says that we are committed to God. An appropriate song backs up the theme: "I will entrust Him... I surrender all." While the song is sung, the people put their hands on their breast. Mike says: "Receive the Spirit of God now." Mike prays and forgives his detractors and persecutors. Some of them, he said, deride him because of his broken Tagalog. The people then, at the command of Mike, raise their envelopes containing their prayer requests. A song, "Lord, here I am" backs the theme. Mike then asks God to bless the petitions. "Let the Lord touch you," he said. A solo is sung: "Touch your people once again." Mike kneels and invokes God's blessing. The choir closes with Haendel's "Hallelujah" chorus.

Mike prepares his weekly talks by spending time at a sea-side resort. He goes to Puerto Azul from Thursday evening to Saturday morning. There he communes with God.

Communing with the Lord before the overnight rallies, he prays and asks one important question, "What do the people need?" Then a verse comes to his mind and, as he picks up the Bible, the Word unfolds before him. (*Gamboa 1995:17*).

***El Shaddai* Answers the Needs of the People**

El Shaddai scratches where it itches. It responds to the needs of its followers. The followers of *El Shaddai* usually come from the lower class. Where poverty exists, as in the Philippines, the main concerns naturally are income and health. Mike Velarde tries to answer these needs, so he strikes a chord in the hearts of the poor. In the words of the *Asiaweek* article, "Velarde has married seeming opposites: modern Asian materialism and traditional religion—a mix that has drawn fire from more conservative Christians" (*Asiaweek 1996:37*). Mike Velarde therefore is one of the few persons who has extensively served the poor in the Philippine church.

People attribute miracles and cures to him, even reviving a dead

child which a woman brought to him (*Gamboa 1995:19*). Velarde attributes these cures and miracles to God. Besides the cure of diseases, some testify that *El Shaddai* has “patched up broken marriages, eradicated homosexual desires, eliminated addictions or landed them jobs abroad” (*Asiaweek 1996:37*).

El Shaddai also tries to financially help its followers. Members who buy shares in the *El Shaddai* Golden Rule Co. are assured of income. An envisioned “Super Bodega” will handle the production and distribution of basic commodities, thereby eliminating the mark-up cost of the middlemen.

Do the more affluent Filipinos join *El Shaddai*? In the beginning the followers came from the lower class. Velarde says:

Some suspect that our followers belong to the *bakya* [wooden slippers] crowd. That is no longer true. If you attend our rallies and fellowships, you will distinguish the rich from their cars. That domestic helpers and their masters are equal here makes one happy. There are no reserved places for the rich. They stand wherever they are. I tell my visitors and friends, “Bear with us. There are no reservations.

Besides material hunger, people have that inherent hunger for the spiritual. Many do not find that in the present nature of the Philippine Catholic Church. Velarde claims that Filipino Catholics went over to Born-Again groups because the Catholic Church has been sacramentalized; it did not evangelize. He does not blame Catholic priests, who have been drawn into the sacramental “machinery.” As a charismatic Catholic group, *El Shaddai* provides Catholics with what they lack. “So what the former Catholics discovered outside, they now realize again within the Church,” says Velarde.

The Theology of *El Shaddai*

Theological reflection, for any Christian, can begin with faith reflection on lived experience in the context of the world in light of God’s word. Velarde uses this kind of process in his theologizing.

In the early years of the movement, Bro. Mike emphasized material wealth and material graces in his sermons. God, Velarde preaches, is a provident God. God not only saves us for the “hereafter” but also for the “here.” He is truly alive and is present here. The centrality of

God is summed up in three terms in Luke 6:38 ("Give to others, and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a *full measure*, a *generous helping*, *poured* into your hands—all that you can hold).

According to Velarde, an evil spirit controls every disease. So leukemia has the evil spirit of leukemia while cancer has the evil spirit of cancer. When he prays over patients, he tries to expel the evil spirit of leukemia or of cancer.

The theology of *El Shaddai* is definitely this-worldly in the sense of being based on an immanent model of the holy, an approach which is quite Filipino. That is why it is concerned about jobs, providing employment, and about health issues.

But Bro. Mike has gradually matured. He now stresses faith and good morals. Velarde stresses that prayer is a powerful means of solving problems. The power of prayer goes with the intensity of faith, with which everything is possible. This faith in Jesus Christ will be answered.

Velarde has the Christian concept of Christ as Son of God who died for our sins, and the concept of the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). "Brother Mike emphasizes a more personal relationship with God and satisfies a need for a more emotional religion" (*Mata* 1997: 28). He does not preach on Christ as Santo Niño, which is one of the two most important Christological images for Filipinos. Rather he emphasizes the Paschal Mystery.

Velarde says: "We do not share the historical Christ but the living Christ that we are really experiencing. So everybody is experiencing the grace and power of the Holy Spirit without restraint."

He skirts issues that are sensitive and hard to explain to Born-Again Christians, such as the use of sacred statues. That is why he does not talk about Christ as the Santo Niño, one of the most popular images of Christ in the Philippines. Because many Filipinos are avid devotees of the Santo Niño, Velarde says many persons cannot pray without the Santo Niño, a "Christ who never grew up."

Velarde prefers to be biblical rather than doctrinal. He picks up some biblical passages and makes them relevant to the nitty-gritty of daily life such as family relationships, how to be a good husband or wife, how to be good children.

He occasionally preaches about Mary. She is not a leader but a servant, one of us pilgrims on the way to our destiny. He does not preach often about Mary because he is Christ-centered, but on May 12 during the Marian celebration, he spoke extensively on Mary before an audience of Catholics and non-Catholics. Bishop Bacani says: "One of the best talks on Mary that I have heard did not come from a cardinal, bishop, or priest; it came from *El Shaddai*." Bro. Mike acknowledges that the propagation of the Marian devotion is not his charism.

"Some people say that his talk has no substance," says Bishop Bacani. "But even to read the summaries of his talks, he gives more substance than our priests and bishops. He gives very solid advice."³

Empowerment of the Laity

In the Philippine church one has to distinguish folk Catholicism from the official church. The latter is ruled according to prescriptions from Rome and is clergy-centered. Folk Catholicism is free. It does not need priests.

Velarde confided to Bacani: "Please don't get mad at me for telling you my observation in the Catholic renewal. When the hierarchy starts to frame guidelines and restrictions, they restrain the movement." Although the bishops have the right to be cautious, over-emphasis on doctrine and regulations "will not let the Spirit move freely," he says. "Now is the age that the Holy Spirit is moving freely everywhere."

The *El Shaddai* can be considered, using the expression of Cox, a "Catholicism without priests" (Cox 1994:178). Since *El Shaddai* is a lay movement, it does not have a great deal of need for the role of the clergy. Although Bishop Teodoro Bacani is its main chaplain, the liturgy of the word (which is the focus of the *El Shaddai* prayer meetings) is the domain of Mike Velarde, a layman.

El Shaddai met with some initial hostility and suspicion from certain bishops. "Do not be surprised about this attitude because this

³ This statement alludes to the talk of Cardinal Sin before the Rotarians of Metro Manila. He said that Velarde's homilies have no substance. The national dailies then picked up this remark. But Velarde remained silent and did not fight back. Instead he acknowledged his theological limitations.

is normal in the Church," Bishop Bacani consoled Mike Velarde. "When there are movements like this, the hierarchy is very extra careful."

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) asked Velarde to meet them in January 1993. He was humble in their presence, explained his mission and answered their questions. The bishop of Laoag, Edmundo Abaya, recalls the meeting:

When Bro. Mike Velarde was invited through Bishop Ted Bacani, who is in charge of *El Shaddai* DWXI-PPFI, to speak during the CBCP, I remember that I was the first one who started the open forum wherein other bishops questioned and he answered well. After hearing him explain, his answers to the questions we asked him during the Bishops' conference, the biases and misinformation I had of him and of the foundation were all clarified. I was very much satisfied. (*El Shaddai Bagong Liwanag Magazine* 1994:36).

Other bishops also softened their stance and then welcomed *El Shaddai* to their respective dioceses.

Velarde told the bishops of what he thought about the sacramentalized church. He says:

I think that the only way to attract the separated brethren back to the Catholic faith is to really use ninety percent of our assets and resources through evangelization. The sacramental functions should be attended to less than evangelization. The hierarchy should encourage lay people to participate in evangelization because most of our parish priests are tied up with the sacramental duties. I think it is a good tie-up.

During the height of a controversy when the question of finance in *El Shaddai* hogged the headlines and when the hierarchy doubted Velarde, twice he offered the leadership to Bishop Bacani. He recalls his conversation with the bish:

I said, "Bishop, maybe my call has ended. I will turn over this movement. I will even help it financially because the leadership was not my intention." But Bishop Bacani answered: "You know, that is not possible because it is your calling. The Church cannot accept it because it was not organized by the Church. You just showed up."

Since *El Shaddai* was founded by a lay person and is run by the laity, the Catholic hierarchy has no official jurisdiction or structural

hold on it. The official link in the archdiocese of Manila is Bishop Teodoro Bacani who heads the Ministry for Lay Formation, as he is the spiritual director of Catholic charismatic renewal in the archdiocese. He regularly lectures to the top elders of *El Shaddai*. Bishop Bacani says that the Philippine bishops are happy about *El Shaddai* because the movement allows "Catholics to practice their faith in an alternative way without leaving the Church." The fundamentalist Christians have made many inroads in the Philippines.

The success of *El Shaddai* therefore has some strains. When Pope John Paul II visited Manila in January 1995, Mike Velarde was introduced, among many other prominent Catholics, as one representing the Bicol region and not as head of *El Shaddai*. Covar thinks that this move seemed indicative of the organizers' desire to tone down the importance of *El Shaddai*.

Velarde defines the objectives of El Shaddai:

The basic mission of this movement is to raise up lay workers, short of being ordained as priest, to really assist the Catholic Church in proclaiming the gospel. So we'll have the royal priesthood and the sacramental priesthood working together.

The success of *El Shaddai* is partly due to its being run by the laity. Another successful group is Couples for Christ. Because the two groups are laity-run, they reach the psyche of the people, something into which clerics may have not sufficient insight. The organizational structures of *El Shaddai* may be grouped into three parts: the international, the national, and the local.

El Shaddai is an international organization. It has more than 10,000 full-time workers who offer themselves to the causes of the movement. It has also part-time volunteers who have their own regular jobs. The Hong Kong chapter, which has between 30,000 to 40,000 supporting members, is the biggest *El Shaddai* chapter outside the Philippines. It is the secretariat or headquarters of the international group that coordinates the other international chapters, but recently there has been a trend to decentralize. Los Angeles is the center for the United States and North America. Rome is the secretariat for Europe.

Of the several El Shaddai chapters outside the Philippines, among the strongest are those based in Hong Kong and Los Angeles. Their chaplains also are priests of other nationalities. For example, Fr. Adolfo

Nicolás, a Spaniard, provincial of the Jesuits in Japan and considered as one of the top intellectual Christians of Japan, is a chaplain of one *El Shaddai* group. Writes the Australian priest, Fr. Bernard Nolan, *El Shaddai* spiritual director in Queensland: "Many members and followers of the *El Shaddai* DWXI-PPFI in our parish are involved in activities through various ministries, especially during the Holy Mass. I personally receive many blessings from God whenever I meet with the group" (*El Shaddai God Almighty* 1997:1:11). From Johor, Malaysia, Fr. Philip Kolandaisamy writes: "God has been bringing bountiful blessings to His people in Masai and Singapore through the power of the Holy Spirit" (:11). Although the majority of members abroad are Filipinos, they also have Australian, American, and Chinese members.

In the Philippines the movement has 500,000 card-bearing members who follow the movement on the *El Shaddai* television and radio broadcasts and occasionally attend the huge prayer meetings at the PICC grounds. It has also non-card bearing members who also attend the weekly sessions in the parishes.

The central national body has three main groups: finance, administration, and a group dedicated purely to studying and preaching the Word of God. The financial arm handles the donations and expenses. The administrative arm takes care of the personnel and human resources.

Mike Velarde, as the servant-leader, is assisted by the spiritual director (Bishop Teodoro Bacani and other priests) and by the executive secretariat, composed of the heads of the different ministries. The seven ministries are music, education, outreach (operations), international chapters, administrative services, finance, and media. A council of elders numbering 24 members assists Bro. Mike in running the organization. As a foundation, *El Shaddai* has also its board of trustees.

The disciples have different designations: elders, evangelists, pastors, and service volunteers. Its administrative arm is quite strict. For example, the service volunteers must be "truly born-again" Catholics, must believe in the Eucharist, must have served the foundation for three years, and must be of good moral character. Of the ten requirements, the sixth seems the strictest: "Must have been completely delivered from any kind of vice, such as gambling, smoking, drinking liquors, and illicit and/or extra marital relationships" (*General Pastoral Guidelines...* 1995:58).

El Shaddai has also parish chapters. The officials of each local chapter are the coordinator, assistant coordinator, and secretary-treasurer. The local chapter has also other ministries, such as the music ministry, which includes the choir and musicians; the service ministry, which has volunteers who arrange the venue of the celebration; the collectors; the ushers; the facilitators. The membership ministry animates the members, issues identification cards, and checks their attendance.

The organization selects promising evangelists. Among the criteria of selection is that they have been formed well in *El Shaddai* for some time, and that they speak well. Candidates undergo a two-year course with continuous follow-up seminars. But their formation is not thorough enough because of the big demand for preachers.

Bishop Teodoro Bacani and other reliable priests of Manila are among the trainers. The better preachers help Mike Velarde in the huge prayer meetings. They also substitute for him whenever he is abroad to visit the other chapters. Other preachers help in the local chapters of *El Shaddai*. These local preachers must undergo a training of two years. In their formation, the local preachers take along two rookies as part of their training.

Velarde is strict on the doctrinal orthodoxy of the preachers, especially on the belief in the Eucharist. There is a danger, under the influence of Born-Again groups, of disregarding the Eucharist.

Because Velarde and his leaders lack theological formation, Bishop Bacani and some priests are their formators. Bishop Bacani handles the formation of the top 24 elders. Brother Mike considers the bishop as his spiritual director and that of his family.

The Use of Filipino Symbols

During the huge prayer rallies, Brother Mike tells the crowd to do some things which outsiders may find strange. For instance, he asks the people to raise their empty wallets to heaven so that God will fill them. He tells them to raise their wallets along with envelopes containing seven petitions. He assures them that they will find money. He also exhorts the people to raise their inverted umbrellas to the sky to "catch" the graces of God. If the people get wet in the rain, Mike tells them that it is all right because rain is God's blessing.

How did he arrive at this practice? He claims that during a prayer rally in the fifth year of his ministry, he heard a voice within him that said: "Raise those handkerchiefs and I will bless them." He was surprised at the response. He later found that even St. Paul used handkerchiefs for healing (*Acts* 19:11-12). The use of handkerchiefs led to the use of other objects.

During the liturgy, Mike throws handkerchiefs containing three pieces of *calamansi* (small lemon) inside. Each handkerchief may have a drawing of Jesus Christ or the text of Psalm 91. These handkerchiefs are to be used for healing oneself. He has bottles of oil for healing.

In a Holy Thursday talk, he told the crowd to bring eggs and bottled water. After motivating the crowd on miracles, he told the crowd to eat the eggs and drink the water. It seems having eggs is also practical because the crowd can eat them after hours of standing.

The use of these symbols has spawned some commercialism. Three eggs are sold; each bearing the words "good works," "faith" and "love." Velarde says that any oil will work, even cooking oil, coconut oil, olive oil, or baby oil. The little shops sell coconut oil and olive oil, amulets, cassette tapes of *El Shaddai* songs, candles, plastic chairs, and food for the hungry. They also have twenty kinds of handkerchiefs, some with psalms, or with the Ten Commandments.

What can be said about the practices mentioned above? Bro. Mike says: "Jesus used mud to heal the blind. In Acts 19, St. Paul used hankies. We use them for healing" (*Doyo* 1996: C4).

Bishop Bacani interprets the practices mentioned above as an externalization of prayer, as an expression of faith. So when a person raises his empty wallet, he externalizes his desire to have money from God. If the people open their umbrellas upside down, Bishop Bacani compares the act to the ancient days of monasticism when older monks told their novices to plant cabbages upside down or fetch water with baskets or buckets with holes. The purpose is to develop the disposition of humility and receptivity, to appear as fools and a spectacle before the world. Doing such "foolish" acts does not automatically insure receiving the grace requested.

Bishop Bacani further defends the *El Shaddai* use of oil as legitimate. It is not forbidden as long as they do not claim that it is a sacrament. He explains:

I would not be surprised if the Lord will use it. For example, Brother Mike says, "Lord, bless this oil that it may be used for the healing of the sick" and the 200,000 people say "Amen!" I think that is not bad theology. We think that only priests will do these things, that if a priest will not bless, that blessing is useless. But what of the prayer of the ordinary people? I think that practice is a good one, provided they do not say, "If you use this, you will certainly get cured." We know that not every body gets well. But many people think they get some results from it.

In my opinion, the phenomena mentioned above are actually a part of Filipino culture, particularly the Filipino concept of causality (Mercado 1974:131-141). Why do farmers hang big empty cans and family-size bottles in trellises? Why do mothers believe that what they desire during pregnancy will have a corresponding effect on their babies? This Filipino concept of causality, I believe, is used in *El Shaddai*. The use of these objects (handkerchiefs, oil, water, eggs), according to the testimonies, have produced miraculous cures. There would seem to be something here akin to the kind of visualization that is used in some cancer therapies. A famous experiment run by the University of Chicago provided evidence for the effectiveness of visualization. And there is a science exhibit in the Ontario Science Museum that says that if a basketball player visualizes the ball entering the ring in a free throw, the chances of it entering are more than if not visualized.

At the beginning of this study, we asked two questions: What makes *El Shaddai* click, and How inculturated is it? These two questions are inter-related since something truly inculturated is more likely to spawn popular following.

Culture has four levels (the physical, the social, the level of worldview, and the symbolic). Inculturation also occurs in these same four levels. Let us start with the symbolic, which often embraces the other three levels. The "sacramentals" of *El Shaddai* as described above reflect inculturation. Further, *El Shaddai* uses Tagalog for the prayer service. English is used minimally (e.g., the Gospel may be read in Tagalog and in English). On the social level, the nature of its huge rallies with its fiesta atmosphere also has a Filipino flavor. In spite of the magnitude, the interpersonal touch remains among the participants. The leadership style of Mike Velarde and his relationship with his members also shows this inculturation. Velarde's oratorical style suits the Filipino temperament. On the level of worldview and values, the

use of a this-worldly theology reflects the Filipino philosophy of time (*Mercado* 1992:88-98).⁴

The question may be raised as to whether it is really inculturation or syncretism. The definition of syncretism has to be rethought (Schineller 1992). For example, the early Christians appropriated the Roman practice of using incense and made it a part of liturgy. Likewise St. Thomas Aquinas used a pagan Greek philosophy as the basis for constructing a type of Christian theology. Both cases are examples of inculturation. But what if indigenous peoples, such as baptized Tinggians in Abra, Philippines, apply their traditional ritual incense used for driving out bad spirits to Christian liturgy? Is it inculturation or syncretism? If an Indian thinker uses the philosophy of Shankara to construct an Indian Christian theology, is it inculturation or syncretism? If somebody says both are bases of syncretism, I believe such a judgment is based on ethnocentrism and not on theology.

Some Issues and Remarks

Let us now tie up a few loose ends and make some conclusions in the foregoing data.

Funding

The issue of financial matters has hounded *El Shaddai* (Nuguid 1996). Who gives an account of the money given? People are generous in their tithes. The half-million card-holding members of the *El Shaddai* Miracle Seed of Faith Covenant Prayer Partners promise to give a monthly faith offering. But Velarde also spends at least one million pesos a week for the overnight rally and TV air time. The program is aired twice weekly over IBC-13 and broadcast live on DWXI. *El Shaddai* also funds free literature and helps charitable causes.

If a conservative estimate of one million pesos is spent weekly, it would add up to 52 million pesos annually. Such a sum could be used to construct a huge church. But no church would be big enough to house 200,000 persons.

⁴ For more details on religious leadership, see *Mercado* 1997 and *Mercado* 1982, 77-79.

Many have questioned the non-transparency of the donations from the followers. To counter the fear that he may be pocketing *El Shaddai* money, Velarde says, "The *El Shaddai* movement has become very prominent because it has no restraint. In my case, I'm all-out for it. All my assets are tied up to it. We don't count the expenses." He laughs at the charges made against him about money.

This is our stand in the ministry: we have never solicited money. I never ask money from people who go to me. Never! I just proclaim the gospel. The gospel tells me that we should share a part of our blessings to back to the gospel. And people do it. I think one of the factors that makes this movement really work is that people are living the gospel. They see the changes in their lives.

The donations from the local chapters do not all go to the main coffers because fifty percent is given to the local parish and the rest spent for the local expenses of the movement. He explains that the money of investors in the *El Shaddai* Golden Rule Co., Inc. (ESGRC) will benefit the followers in terms of services and income. The company "is for the upliftment of the lives of *El Shaddai* members" (*Doyo* 1996:C2).

Velarde notices that in his involvement in numerous Church meetings and committees, the bottom line is money. But he says: "Why make money the problem when the Lord promised to support our activities?"

El Shaddai has an accounting system; a copy of its yearly audit can be asked any time. Local chapters have their own accounting of the expenses. The national chapters at their start get financial support from the national office. After the local chapter gets strong enough, the support is withdrawn and funneled into other new chapters.

As a multinational organization the *El Shaddai* needs manpower. How does the organization run? It recruits service volunteers. The full-time volunteers receive monthly and daily stipends on the principle of "no work, no pay." The monthly stipend runs between ten to twenty thousand pesos (US\$770).⁵ The monthly payroll averages three million pesos (US\$115,845).

⁵ This was the exchange rate when this study was written. The peso later greatly devalued.

The Future of El Shaddai

The *El Shaddai* group is focused on the person of Mike Velarde. It has become like a cult. While this is fine, it cannot last forever. What is the future of *El Shaddai*? If Brother Mike were to be incapacitated, what will happen to the movement?

The history of religious congregations in the Catholic Church shows that the founders and religious leaders were charismatic. The successors of these religious congregations then institutionalize the founder's charism. But in doing so they risk blocking the free-flowing Spirit. Consequently some congregations have even thrown out their founders because they did not toe the line.

I see the following possible scenarios. The first scenario depicts that his trained preachers will take over. Or the successors could be a group of persons chosen from the council of elders. Several of his trained assistants have taken over the huge *El Shaddai* gatherings during his foreign trips. The successors will institutionalize the features of *El Shaddai*, something like what happened to the biggest home-grown Philippine group, the *Iglesia ni Cristo* (INC). The regimented INC has remained solid even after the death of its founder, Felix Manalo.

Velarde says:

I myself could not understand why I was raised up by the Lord... Based on my little learning from the Bible, the ways of God are really amazing. He prepares somebody. Of course we are preparing the organizational structure of the movement so that it can sustain the movement when I am no longer there. But normally the leader is not really born; a leader is raised up. I really do not feel now who will succeed me.

He continues:

How to lead a spiritual organization cannot be taught. The grace and anointing has to be really given unto them by the Lord Himself, not by men. During the time of Moses, they did not know his successor until Joshua was called. I suppose the same is true of the various religious congregations... Along the way after the founder has been recalled, the Lord has prepared somebody.

One of the by-laws of the *El Shaddai* corporation states that a group of hand-picked, full-time voting members will elect the successor

of Velarde. It will be similar to the conclave that elects a new pope. Velarde hopes that the Lord will pick out one of his three sons or six grandsons as his successor.

The second scenario is that *El Shaddai* will split up after the time of Velarde. One reason is the Filipino penchant for small groups. We saw this trend already when Fr. Archie Guiriba, OFM, a close ally of Mike Velarde, split up and formed his own group, *Shalom*.

A third but remote scenario is that *El Shaddai* will bolt away from the Catholic Church. The huge following is power and power is a big temptation to become independent. Politicians have been courting the *El Shaddai* vote. So far Mike Velarde has shied away. But he has allowed presidential and senatorial aspirants five minutes each to speak before the PICC assemblies. But even if future leaders bolt from the Catholic Church, the majority of members will not. Anyway, Velarde has no plans of separating himself from the Catholic Church:

I have no plans of putting up my own religion. That is a problem. Besides my calling is to build the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is me and the rest of the people. It is not a temple made of wood or stones. And so we are spending every centavo that comes into this ministry to proclaim the Good News.

Who knows the future? Some religious groups were designed to last long but have then become extinct. The future will tell the fate of *El Shaddai*.

"I really think that *El Shaddai* was raised by God to help the Church in the Philippines and also local churches abroad," says Bishop Bacani. "The Catholic Church of the Philippines today has become stronger because of *El Shaddai*. If it were not for *El Shaddai*, many would have already joined the Born-Again groups. Because of *El Shaddai*, many migrant Filipinos find unity in the faith. They find a focus for their activity and religiosity. And it has helped the church in other countries like Taiwan and Japan."

Earlier we quoted Harvey Cox who said that the future of Christianity points towards Pentecostalism. So this movement will definitely influence the present structure and mentality of the churchmen. Velarde agrees: "What I am seeing now, and I hope I am not mistaken, will drastically change the religious organization in the Catholic Church" (Doyo 1996:C4).

References

- Asiaweek*. 1996. "Rising Prophet," September 20:36-43.
- Bagong Liwanag Magazine*. 1994. August.
- Cox, Harvey. 1995. *Fire From Heaven, The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Doyo, Ma. Ceres P. 1996. "The Man Who Has More Than Enough," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 14:C1-C4.
- El Shaddai God Almighty Newsletter*. 1997. Volume VII, no. 1
- Gamboa, Coylee et al. "Servant Leaders, Their Mission, Their Message." *NR, National Renewal*, December:17-19.
- General Guidelines and Omnibus Administrative Code for Service Volunteers*. 1995 Revised Edition.
- Mata, Elvira. 1997 "Devotees by the Bay." *Isyu*, January-March: 26-29.
- McKenzie, John L. 1965 *Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: The Macmillan Co.
- Mercado, Leonardo N. 1974. *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*. Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications.
- _____. 1977. *Filipino Religious Psychology*. editor. Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications.
- _____. 1982. *Christ in the Philippines*. Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications.
- _____. 1992. *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*. Manila: Divine Word Publications.
- _____. 1997. *Doing Filipino Theology*. Manila: Divine Word Publications.
- Nuguid, Nati. 1996 "How'd He Do That?" *Philippines Free Press*, June 22:2-5
- Prior, John. 1997 "Inculturation of Worship and Spirituality, A Vision from Indonesia." *Sedos Bulletin*, 29 (August-September) :239-242.
- Romulo, Erwin. 1996. "Mike Velarde: Prophet or Profiteer?" *The Philippine Star*, Nov. 2:40.
- Schineller, Peter. 1992. "Inculturation and Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16:50-53.
- Silva, Jose with Robert B. Stone. 1983. *The Silva Mind Control Method for Business Managers*. New York: Pocket Books.

- Velarde, Mariano Z. 1992a. "Ang Mahiwagang Pagdating ni *El Shaddai*," *Bagong Liwanag*, November-December.
- _____. 1992b *How To Win Your Battles All The Time*. Makati City: *El Shaddai* Miracle Publications.
- _____. 1996. *Mga Butil ng Gintong Aral ni El Shaddai*. Metro Manila: DBS Printing Press.
- _____. 1997. "The Missing Part," *Manila Bulletin*, March 30:11+E23.
- _____. 1998. "Mike Velarde on *El Shaddai*," *Ugnay-Diwa*, no. 18:9-13.

APPENDIX

Organization and Structure of *El Shaddai*

(Source: *Bagong Liwanag* Magazine, April-August, 1997, p. 9)

