'Figuring' Catholicism: The Santo Niño and Religious Discourse in Cebu

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BYSTANDERS WATCHED ASTOUNDED as several hundred Santo Niño replicas were placed in large plastic bags and loaded onto garbage trucks by Department of Public Service (DPS) personnel. The vehicles were instructed to head to the landfill in Barangay Inayawan where the figures were to be left for the scavengers who literally live off Cebu City’s piles of refuse. Yet this was neither an act of charity nor of sanitation on the part of the DPS. The personnel were enacting the direct orders of the city’s mayor to “confiscate and consider as garbage anything that they will find along D. Jackosalem Street and bring these to Barangay Inayawan for disposal” (Cf. Bognac 2003). The Santo Niño vendors from whom the icons were forcibly taken did not give in without a fight. The August 2003 encounter between city officials and Santo Niño merchants was marked by a series of violent scuffles, until the latter’s makeshift stalls were reduced into little more than a heap of dirt and rubble.

This incident was the latest installment to a feud that had been raging over the previous two years. In March 2002, members of the Santo Niño Sidewalk Vendors Association (SNSVA) paraded a litany of Santo Niño replicas as they rallied in the premises of Cebu’s City Hall. The SNSVA is an organization established to represent
merchants who sell images of the Child King along the main thoroughfare leading into the Basilica Minore. In December 2001, the SNSVA met with Cebu City Mayor Tomas Osmeña and compromised to reduce the size of their stalls, following complaints from the latter that they congested traffic flow in the area. This rally was held to express their indignation at what they saw as the mayor’s importunate attempts to drive them out of the site. The mayor had made previous threats to forcibly demolish their stalls before implementing an anti-jaywalking ordinance (Cebu City Ordinance 398) along D. Jackosalem Street. This was an explicit attempt to “starve” the vendors of potential customers who were to be caught by City enforcers once they cross that portion of road towards the stalls. But the “starvation” that Osmeña had intended in a commercial sense was used as the very theme of the protest against him. Along with their Santo Niño replicas, the vendors group brought with them empty pots to symbolize their hungry stomachs and a man dressed himself as the grim reaper to signify that the ordinance was “killing them” on both a commercial and physical level (Cf. Catonaö 2002).

It was immediately obvious that the controversy went beyond the mercantile aspects of the City’s new policy on the replicas. The rallyists were parading their merchandise because they were aware of a symbolic dimension to their cause. The stalls outside the Basilica were more than points of sale for religious images. This place had a tradition of being the source of ‘miraculous’ icons whose proximity to the Basilica invested them with a unique and exclusive sense of holiness and sanctity. It is for this reason that the vendors refused the Mayor’s offer of relocating them to concrete stalls away from the entrance to the Basilica – a move that would not only place them further away from their church-going clientele, but diminish the spiritual substance of their
goods. In addition to this, the firm commissioned to build the concrete stalls was identified as a close associate of the Mayor, prompting allegations of corruption on his part and repeated calls for his resignation. It is under these circumstances that the SNSVA had chosen to infuse their rally with the iconography of the Santo Niño. Indeed, it was by all intents and purposes an attempt to draw an association between what they saw as the Mayor’s political misconduct, and the equally reprehensible charge of his religious and moral decadence.

By August 2003, members of the SNSVA were still selling their merchandise in areas along the entrance to the Basilica in defiance of City ordinances. The Squatters Prevention and Encroachment Elimination Division (SPEED), a task force established by the Mayor himself, immediately took action in response to such recalcitrance. SPEED was ordered to assist the DPS in forcibly acquiring the images sold by vendors, as well as the rest of their paraphernalia along the sidewalk. With tempers on both sides running high, violence ensued until the icons were confiscated at gunpoint by the better-equipped City officials. Indeed, the Mayor himself was aware of the potential consequences of treating “as garbage” the icons he ordered confiscated. He later recanted on this stance by adding that the icons would be distributed to scavengers at Barangay Inayawan, and not “desecrated… which [the SVSNA] hope we will do to make me look bad.” (October 11, 2003 Press Conference, Cebu City). The Mayor’s attempt at adding a charitable slant to the demolition, however, did not earn him respect from the hierarchy of the Cebuano Archdiocese. Cebu’s Ricardo Cardinal Vidal later publicly criticized the Mayor for his disrespect and abuse of the Santo Niño images, warning that if he did not take a more sensible position regarding the issue, he was “facing a rebellion in his hands”.

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON
The Rebellion and the Icon

The subject of this chapter is the discursive politics of ‘use’ and ‘misuse’ of religious iconography in the context of popular uprisings in the Philippines. The previous two chapters showed how the Santo Niño figure can become subject to the idiosyncratic interpretations of the faithful in spite of the determinate meanings associated to them according to the doctrine. The example above however, highlights a way in which the Santo Niño de Cebu is not just a subject of testing interpretations, but an object co-opted for specific desires and agendas (calling to mind Geertz’s (1973) formulation of religious symbol). Through the semantically open appropriation of its meanings, the Santo Niño becomes utilised as a symbol of protest against the State and, as we shall see, against the Church institution itself. The question here is how icons like the Santo Niño are brought to bear on causes and agendas that often outstrip the spiritual and theological functions for which they were intended. What are the processes by which religious iconographies contextualise mass action in the Philippines – a practice that repeats itself on many different occasions throughout the history of the country?

In addressing such issues, this chapter will engage in an historical re-evaluation of events of “revolution” against colonial and state institutions. “Revolution” is here defined as the combined action of a large group of people against what they see as the oppressive and hegemonic force that prevents the full enactment of their common interest. The concern here is to describe the process by which those revolutionary
interests had become compacted in religious symbols, transforming them into iconographies of both worship and rebellion.

The first section traces this process in the context of Cebu and the Santo Niño specifically. In the anti-colonial uprising in the late nineteenth century, as in the mass protests against the presidency of Joseph Estrada in 2001, it will be seen that it was through the Santo Niño that the idiom of the revolution was articulated and vocalized. In several ways, this use of the Santo Niño icon was made outside, even against, the intentions of the Catholic Church institution. While varying in outcome to simultaneous revolutions in Manila, both these events in Cebu had been viewed as a “local” contribution to what was a ‘national’ uprising. In both cases, the Santo Niño itself had contextualised this localisation within a prevailing discourse of regional identity vis a vis the national capital.

Projecting beyond Cebu, the second section will discuss the use of Marian iconography in the “People Power” revolutions in Manila in the last two decades. The focus here will be to expand upon the role of the Catholic Church as arbiters of iconography, as discussed in the second section of the previous chapter. This momentary divergence away from the Santo Niño is necessary. For it enables an examination of how the Philippine Catholic Church is able to exert its authoritative jurisdiction over icons in general by projecting ‘People Power’ as both an event of political upheaval and a religious and moral responsibility. This essay does not argue that the success or failure of popular action in the Philippines is reliant upon the support of the Catholic Church as an institution, or dependent upon the effectiveness by which religious iconography is used. Rather, this is a project that involves attending to the workings of power and agency that
condition mass action as an experience that is, simultaneously, a 'religious' and revolutionary affair.

I

Soon after, the wave of Enlightenment came the Philippine Revolution — and this unheaval [Sic.] is likewise reflected in the Philippine Santo Niño. The wave of nationalism that swept the country at the turn of the century produced another native version of the Christ-Child: a Santo Niño as common tao, dressed in white camisa and red kundiman trousers, and wearing salakot and bakya. Such 'Filipinized' images of the Christ-Child can still be seen today, especially in Aglipayan Churches; and they testify to the fact that, even during the Revolution, we Filipinos remained loyal to the Santo Niño. (Joaquin [Pseudonym Quijano de Manila] 1983, 121-122)

IN THE ABOVE PASSAGE, National Artist Nick Joaquin commemorates the Santo Niño’s inexorable linkage not only with the will to “nationalism” in the Philippines, but with the “wave of Enlightenment” that engendered the people’s awakening to it. The re-appropriation of the figure in “Filipinized” form — an event marked by the dressing of the figure in the garb of the Filipino masses — indicated that the birth of ‘Filipinoness’ did not involve the discarding of the most potent signifiers of Spanish colonialism. Rather, as we shall see, the continued relevance of the Santo Niño in anti-colonial or anti-state revolution framed Filipino “loyalty” and in many ways gave legitimacy to the fostering of nationalistic sentiment. This section will initially reflect upon the anti-colonial revolt in Cebu at the end of the nineteenth century, whereupon Cebuanos were able to temporarily overthrow the Spanish colonial government through religiously-inspired mass uprising.

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON
By this point in time, Manila had been the seat of Colonial power for over two centuries, relegating Cebu to the economic and political periphery. Yet the Visayan city remained relevant to the Spanish Church/State by virtue of its historical significance as the place in which the Iberian campaign began. Of this event, the Santo Niño had become the most potent signifier and its traditionally strong association with the "spiritual capital" of Cebu remained in force. Yet in spite of this, the meanings which were attached to the icon were by no means immutable or uncontested. For it was during the beginning of the twentieth century, in the context of burgeoning anti-colonial sentiment, that the figure of the Santo Niño began to be conceived and used in ways that had exceeded those meanings ascribed to it by the Firarocracy. It is with these processes of recalcitrance and 'revolutionary' interpretations that this chapter is concerned.

The death of Jose Rizal in 1896 had galvanized revolutionary groups in Manila to stage violent uprisings against Spanish government, inflaming a burgeoning tide of anti-colonial sentiment that had been brewing in the Tagalog regions since 1872. These movements, typically initiated by the Katipunan secret society, expressed ideals of freedom (kalayaan) and change through the enactment of Christ’s pasyon and the chanting of sinakulo plays (Ileto 1979). While the various anti-colonial uprisings would enjoy varying degrees of success, the religious undertones of insurgency and revolution would be exported and reproduced in places beyond the vicinity of Manila as the century drew to a close.

In Cebu City on Palm Sunday in 3 April 1898, a mixed group of urban workers, professionals, students and gentry clashed with Spanish soldiers and their Cebuano recruits on Veleriano Weyler Street (later renamed Tres de Abril street in
commemoration of the date of the uprising). News of the brewing anti-Spanish sentiment in Manila had reached Cebu through the operatives of the Katipunan, culminating in this uprising which was timed specifically to coincide with this religious feast day. The revolutionaries were led by a Cebuano named Pantaleon Villegas (known by his pseudonym, Leon Kilat) who, in collaboration with the Katipunan, sought to overthrow by sheer force of numbers the underarmed Spanish forces in the islands. In a matter of hours, some five thousand Cebuanos besieged colonial troops, forcing the latter to retreat into Fort San Pedro. As they withdrew, Spanish soldiers are reported to have shouted “Viva España!”, to which the rebels replied triumphantly: “Mabuti ang Katipunan! Mabuti ang Santo Niño!” [“Long live the Katipunan! Long live the Santo Niño!”].

“Mabuti and Katipunan!” was a cry that gave acknowledgement to the Tagalog origins of anti-Spanish revolt and expressed the belief that the uprising against the Spanish was not localized to that area alone. This citing of the Katipunan framed Cebuano allegiance to the Tagalog cause, recognizing that the calls for the nation were framed upon a far-reaching consensus. Yet the addition of “Mabuti ang Santo Niño!” re-emplotted the ‘national’ struggle within a distinctively localized Cebuano milieu. For the power and legitimacy of the added phrase rested upon the identification of the Santo Niño as the symbol of Cebuano localness – an association itself legitimized by Spanish authority. Furthermore, the autonomous partisanship of the Santo Niño finds allegorical contextualisation in the independent actions of a child from its parentage. The Bible refers to a young Jesus wandering away from his parents only to be found sermonizing the Pharisees. While not explicitly evoked in what is now remembered as the Tres de

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1 The Cebuano revolutionary Felix Sales recounted these events in his unpublished memoirs. See Go, 1976, and Vano, 1998, 115

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON 183
Abril revolt, Christ’s prodigious independence at such an early age was not an unfamiliar notion to Cebuanos. In the context of the revolution, it was this connection that facilitated the metaphorical and semantic leap into the notion of a sovereign Filipinas subsisting without Mother España. As such, the Santo Niño’s autonomy contextualised liberty [Mabuhî] in a Cebuano context while maintaining solidarity with their Tagalog brethren.

The Tres de Abril uprising in Cebu was successful in achieving its objective, at least in the short-term while the Spanish remained within the walls of Fort San Pedro waiting for reinforcements. This victory became more poignant particularly in light of the fact that the struggle in Manila had not generally enjoyed as much success. In some important ways, the difference was thought to be brought about by the Santo Niño’s intervention, symbolizing an element that imbued the uprising with the critical force of divine backing.

Like other colonial uprisings during the turn of the century, the Tres de Abril revolution became constructed as a religiously-inspired uprising, though there was a sense in which the expression of that religiosity was a recalcitrant and ‘unofficial’ one. The revolutionaries are identified in scholarly accounts as practitioners of a folk Catholicism and the manner in which they engaged in violent action reflected such. Its leadership was seemingly aware of the power invested in folk religious materials and objects – materials commonly associated with what Ileto calls the “third realm” of rural life in the colony.² Leon Kilat was himself said to be in possession of an amulet he believed rendered him invulnerable to bullets. The rank-and-file armed themselves with

²See Ileto (1998, 85-86) and Bolasco (1994). Bolasco identifies most of the leaders of the revolts as babaylan or local shamens in the animist tradition whose influence gave the revolutionaries the sense of invulnerability to engage better armed Spanish troops.
crude weapons, and either placed the Holy Host in their mouths to protect them from Spanish weapons or attached triangular anting-anting (amulets) inscribed with Latin and Spanish inscriptions to their foreheads. Tres de Abril was not only a successful revolt of the masses in a political sense. It was a victory of "folk Catholicism" against its more official proponents, aided in no small measure by the Santo Niño who was on "their side" throughout the uprising. In its capacity as a revolutionary icon, therefore, the Santo Niño was an image that corresponded to both 'folk' models and scriptural precedents whereupon no conceptual or practical conflict was perceived between the two (resembling the conception of syncretism, as described in the previous chapter).

Yet while the Cebuano revolutionaries won the battle, they had not won the war. The Cebuano control of Cebu proved to be short-lived when, on 7 April, the Spanish warship Don Juan de Austria arrived and lay siege on the Cebuano controlled areas of the city. The following day, Leon Kilat was assassinated in the southern town of Carcar, in spite of the amulets that were thought to render him invulnerable. Subsequent Spanish reprisal in other areas was swift and violent. Before the week was over, hundreds of Cebuanos were dead and the Spanish were able to regain control of the city.

Nevertheless, Cebuanos today remember Tres de Abril as a triumphant effort against overwhelming odds, constituting a noteworthy aberration to what was otherwise a series of Filipino failures against the Spanish regime. And if Tres de Abril is significant in a symbolic sense, it is because the revolution served to validate the semantic and figurative function of the Santo Niño. Its involvement in the uprising communicated with the popular myths that tell of its propensity to wander off in defiance of its Church keepers, or in those that depict it as a partisan ally in struggles against the established

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON
authority of the Church/State. In this respect, the acceptance of the Santo Niño into Cebuano oral and literary culture was an event that exceeded the limits which colonial powers demarcated for it, even while their power over its orthodox worship remained largely in force.

Indeed, Tres de Abril became significant by virtue of its iconographic associations. Like in the Tagalog regions, the symbols by which Spanish colonialism sought to attain religious and moral docility had been used as the very mechanism by which opposition and revolution was expressed. In the nineteenth century, the Santo Niño had managed to serve the conflicting agendas of both dominant and subversive interests in the colony, manifesting a discourse of identity in which the Santo Niño de Cebu was the main instrument of expression. As an icon invoked during a Tagalog-initiated campaign against Spanish authority, it constituted a distinctly Cebuano statement of their involvement in a countrywide effort.

The nineteenth century, then, is significant for reasons beyond the modernization of a nation propelled by the technologies of progress and the forces of commerce and exchange. This was also a time of momentous political and social upheaval, characterized ironically by Filipinos’ “loyalty” to a Christian figure. The ‘awakening’ inscribed in the Tres de Abril revolution, frames this as a specifically subversive loyalty in which, through the Santo Niño, Cebuano revolutionaries “figured” a future autonomous to the designs of the Spanish empire. In the figure’s involvement in revolution, Cebuanos fostered hopes and expectations upon a metaphorical depiction of a Christ Child acting independently from its original purveyors. As such, it can be seen

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3 Versions of these myths can be found in the appendix to this thesis. See also Delacalzada, 1965 and Tenazas, 1965.
that the Santo Niño was a figure indelibly connected with change and upheaval. The clashes between SNSVA and the Cebu City government – and the poignant involvement of Santo Niño icons in these clashes -- can therefore be seen within an historical precedence of iconographic appropriation that continues to manifest itself in incidents of uprising today. It is to such events that this study now turns.

The “Sinulog Revolution”: The ‘Holy Coincidence’ of 2001

In 2001, Cebuanos again found themselves engaged in a significant upheaval of national proportions. The impeachment trial of former President Joseph Estrada in January was an event that brought into sharp focus the workings of the Philippine state and the integrity of its legal institutions. More so than any other governmental proceeding, the trial’s significance was larger than its litigants, as it compelled the involvement of virtually the entire Filipino population. Cebuanos were among those who were transfixed by the events of the trial as it unfolded on television and radio. For most, it was characterised by revelations of huge, unimaginable sums of money, stock-market manipulations and elaborate bank fraud attributed to the incumbent Head of State. And if such activities seemed beyond the scope of immediate experiences for the Cebuano ‘on the street’, there was enough in the ‘everyman’ persona of Estrada himself that connected the trial with the everyday life of the Filipino poor.⁴

⁴ Although the trial was conducted in English and was at times highly technical, commentary in Cebuano contextualised the issues with great dramatic effect. People from all walks of life became familiar with the idiom of exchange, deploying legal jargon in many spontaneous and incidental discussions around the city. Moreover, the trial engendered a familiarity with specific clauses of a constitution that was otherwise seen as a set of unintelligible codes that, while exerting an influence on their lives, otherwise lay beyond their immediate comprehension. Yet the trial was most significant not so much for its constitutional or legal implications, but for the notion that a man who had promised to put an end to their poverty was himself
There was a strong sense that there was a distinctive Cebuano ‘voice’ in the trial through the two Cebuano Senators and the Chief Justice who participated in it. The participation of Cebuanos in the litigation process gave credence to the notion that the City had representatives in what was an event of national significance. Though it was transpiring in the highest judicial and governmental arena, most Cebuanos I spoke with did not feel that they were entirely powerless to influence the course of the proceedings. As the trial wore on, there was a real sense in which something immensely significant was coming to a head and Cebuanos were looking towards their immediate leadership to facilitate their involvement in it.

In the Cebuano press, a great deal of anxiety was expressed particularly as the City’s Ricardo J. Cardinal Vidal had refused to be swayed by public opinion. While this kind of reticence might perhaps be otherwise excused, given the doctrine of separating church and state matters, Cardinal Vidal came under increasing pressure in light of the partisan stance of the Clergy in the Archdiocese of Manila. Jaime Cardinal Sin himself made no secret of his strong objection to Estrada, whose breaches in duty stemmed not merely from political incompetence but from a moral and spiritual misconduct. Since late 2000, Sin had openly encouraged public condemnation of the “womanizing Estrada”, lending the Church’s full support to Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the United Opposition. In his October 2000 “call to EDSA”, Sin reminded Filipinos of the “power of the Rosary and the gathering of the people [that] stopped tanks and toppled a dictator” (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 4 November 2000). Cardinal Sin was calling for the accused of engaging in egregious acts towards his own personal gratification. The impeachment trial was a gripping story of revelation, featuring the deconstruction of the man who had posited himself as a champion of the poor, yet was being charged with excesses the likes of which flew in the face of everything he claimed to represent.
dismissal of Estrada not only on the grounds of violating his Oath of Office, but in being
derelict in his spiritual obligation as a person who had promised much but delivered little.

In this context, the impeachment trial was a prelude to events of religious and
spiritual tribulation as much as they were junctures of political upheaval. But by mid-
January, Filipinos were becoming increasingly agitated about the course of the trial,
particularly after the defeat of the Senate vote to open a mysterious envelope containing
bank statements that would supposedly incriminate Estrada. This led to the suspension of
the whole trial when the prosecution team had chosen to boycott the remainder of the
proceedings. In Cebu, the results of the Senate vote were met with demonstrations at the
Fuente-Osmena round-about, traditionally a main focal point in the City. Within
minutes, news of the prosecution walkout was circulated through text messages,
prompting several hundred Cebuanos to participate in a noise barrage to vent their anger.
As in Manila, where the proliferation of text brought heralded people onto the streets in
protest, the local media were proclaiming that “People Power Two” had begun in Cebu.

By January 18 -- well after anti-Estrada protests had began in earnest -- Cardinal
Vidal remained close-mouthed, prompting speculation that his reticence was brought
about by his close relationship with Estrada. Throughout the President’s regime, it was in
Cardinal Vidal that Estrada found religious solace, taking upon himself the role of his
personal spiritual counsel. Estrada would make frequent trips to Cebu and visit Vidal
perhaps lending credence to the perception that Cebu was the spiritual capital of the

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5 Indeed it must be stated that Cardinal Vidal did not perform this role exclusively. Estrada had also been
known to have a close association with “Brother” Mike Velarde, the leader of a Filipino Christian sect, the
El Shaddai. In line with his public persona of “Erap Para Sa Mahirap” (Erap for the Poor”), his
relationship with Velarde kept him in touch with the underclass who comprised of the bulk of El Shaddai
devotees. Yet it was Vidal who accompanied President Arroyo when she visited Estrada in prison in an
attempt to garner the support of Estrada’s still forceful support base, implicitly fulfilling the role of spiritual
counsellor an “official” capacity (Philippine Daily Inquirer 19April 2001).
nation. Yet in these moments when public opinion against Estrada was growing, Cebuanos looked to Vidal no longer for his permission or 'blessing', but for his admission to the burgeoning tide of anti-Estrada sentiment. There was a sense of irony in the notion that Cebu as the 'spiritual capital of the nation' was going ahead with their "divinely sanctioned" protests in spite of their own Cardinal's reluctance and silence. The 'holy' revolution in Cebu was set to be enacted without the support of a clearly defined religious leadership. For unlike in Manila, the foremost emissary of Christianity in Cebu would not provide the religious legitimacy sought for by a large majority of his flock.

A Revolutionary Sinulog

The mounting tension of the impeachment trial occurred during a time when Cebuanos attention was occupied by matters of seemingly contradictory significance. During early January of every year, Cebuanos would otherwise be concerned with the most important part of the City's religious calendar, the Sinulog festival. The annual celebration of the Santo Niño's feast, takes the form of a celebratory street parade of floats, as well as many other religious commemorations of the arrival of Christianity in the sixteenth century. The Sinulog is an event that literally stops the city every year, bringing merchants from all over the region to take advantage of the influx of tourists who come to the island for the occasion. As many as one hundred thousand people congregate and form a festive street parade from the shoreline at dusk along Cebu City's main arteries, culminating in Holy Mass and commemorative rites in the Basilica
foreground. In light of the heightened activity the Sinulog generates, the weeks immediately before the start of the festival are normally marked not only with a sense of religious expectation, but with an eye towards immediate material gain to the Cebuano economy.

There was a sense, therefore, that the early weeks of 2001 in Cebu were tempered with heightened and somewhat conflicting emotions. While on the one hand, preparations were underway for a festive religious celebration, Cebuanos were coming to terms with the dramatic disintegration of what was billed “the trial of the century”. The general anxiety was one that anticipated momentous political upheaval the likes of which had most recently been experienced in the uprising that led to the ousting President Marcos in 1986. Indeed, it was in such a context that Cardinal Vidal’s reluctance was perceived. For the intervention of the Church in that particular instance was arguably the most vital factor in bringing the first “People Power” revolution to fruition. Without the unilateral support of the local Cebuano Church, the prospect of a second People Power Revolution was received with some degree of trepidation. Would this revolution be marked with violence and bloodshed without the symbolic and practical endorsement of the Cebuano archbishop? Would Cebuanos take a united stand on the issue of the President’s future, while the Archdiocese remained ambivalent in its views? As the events unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the coincidence of Sinulog and the popular uprising against Estrada would condition Cebuano conceptions of how change can and should have come about during those early weeks of 2001.

By the time the Senate impeachment trial had become dissolved, Sinulog festivities were already underway. The Sinulog celebrations of 2001 were unique in that
the political crisis reached its peak within the same week as the festival’s beginning. The
coincidence had initially manifested itself as a potentially volatile situation, inasmuch as
the sites of protest were also the major focal points of the festivity. The vicinity of the
Fuente-Osmena round-about, the focal point of anti-Estrada rallies, was also slated as the
venue for major Sinulog activities. The local media was already foreboding that the
Sinulog was in danger of being “politicized” and its religiosity marred by negative and
possibly violent forms of unrest. Yet there was also a sense of inevitability about the
situation, particularly in light of escalating tensions in Manila, encouraged in no small
measure by the continued calls of Cardinal Sin to congregate in the Virgin Mary’s shrine
along Epifanio de Los Santos Avenue (EDSA). The significance of the convergence
between religious festivity and political upheaval was not lost upon Cebuanos, but in the
early weeks of January there was some uncertainty as to how exactly this would be
manifested.

The official program of the 2001 Sinulog made no mention of any form of
political action as part of the year’s festivities. But by 18 January, it was clear that anti-
Estrada demonstrations were becoming integrated by the people themselves into the
mechanism of Sinulog festivity. During the fluvial parade of the Santo Niño across the
City’s shoreline, anti-Estrada placards were displayed on the accompanying watercraft.
Participants at the street parade itself played and performed anti-Estrada jingles that by
now were proliferating across the country. The traditional Sinulog chant glorifying the
Santo Niño, “Pit Senor”\(^6\) was still being uttered around the city. But in 2001, that chant
had an appendage that perhaps encapsulated the uniqueness and significance of the year’s

\(^6\) There are numerous etymological interpretations of this phrase. The more common one is that it is a
shortened version of “Fiesta Señor”.

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON

192
festivities: now, it could be heard alongside the equally prevalent cry of “Erap Resign!”, echoing the calls of those in Manila, and other parts of the Visayas. The conjoining of the two phrases became significant of the convergence that was occurring in 2001. It was a way in which protesters could acknowledge the gravity of the current political situation, without losing sight of the religious and festive meaning of the season.

Anti-Estrada demonstrations had up to then been conducted by a small yet vociferous group of protesters around the Fuente Osmeña vicinity. During the two weeks of the Sinulog, however, the protests had become integrated as part of the Sinulog parade itself. This is not to say that anti-Estrada sentiment was somewhat quelled or had been ‘deferred’ while celebrations were taking place. There was a sense, rather, that protest action in Cebu took on a more ‘festive’ countenance in light of the convergence of the religious and political situation. In Cebu, this was particularly felt as the local media began to call the events of January 2001 a political uprising inspired by, rather than stifled, by Sinulog festivities. Reminiscent of the Tres de Abril uprising, more significantly, the conjoining of the phrases of religiosity (“Pit Señor!”) with that of political protest (“Erap Resign!”) situated the events of the Sinulog in 2001 within a discourse of identity, positing once again Cebuanos distinctive contribution to a national effort.

Cardinal Vidal’s reluctance to take on an anti-Estrada line was particularly poignant in this context. As the spiritual leader of the “spiritual capital of the Philippines”, he became perceived among his flock as the person who would have given the anti-Estrada movement in Cebu the full religious legitimacy the People Power demonstrations in Manila had. In spite of his reticence however, there was a sense in
which this legitimacy was provided by the Santo Niño itself, enabling protesters to circumvent more ‘official’ channels. While it is identified as a folk Christian tradition, the ‘sensationalism’ of the Sinulog provided a viable alternative to official modes of Christianity in supplying religious sanction to a popular movement. Indeed the ‘holy coincidence’ of anti-Estrada protest and the Sinulog festival made an important statement in favour of Cebuano national identity. For through the idiom of religious commemoration, Cebuanos saw themselves making a distinct and important contribution towards ameliorating a political affliction that was otherwise defined by events that occurred in EDSA alone. The eventual departure of Estrada from Malacañang by 20 January was an event identified in the Cebuano media as a “providential” occurrence founded upon the intervention of the Santo Niño for whom the Sinulog was celebrated. In this sense, Cebuanos could take some responsibility for the success of Estrada’s eventual ouster, refuting the contention that national change can only come about within the environs of the national capital.

Unlike in Manila, where a holy revolution was enacted upon Cardinal Sin’s prompting, the anti-Estrada movements in Cebu had been imbued with retrospective religious significance. In the Mass commemorating the official end of the Sinulog in 2001, Cebuano Archbishop Du remarked in his Homily that the eventual ousting of Estrada was a “gift” of the Santo Niño no less. The Holy Child, claimed he, chose to affect change in country not through political processes or constitutional upheavals, but “through the rhythmic beat of Sinulog percussion” (Sun Star Daily, 23 January 2001). In ascribing a kind of divine intention to the coincidence of events in 2001, the Archbishop reaffirmed the extent to which the Santo Niño was embedded into the fabric of Cebuano
sensibilities, particularly in moments of its unraveling. His words can only have potency in the context of the Santo Niño as a ‘people’s’ figure which had previously contextualised the popular Cebuano uprisings against overwhelming odds. The potency of his statement derived from an allusion to a legacy of the Santo Niño’s involvement in affairs beyond the religious, to influence matters of political significance. In this sense, the Archbishop was using the Santo Niño as a metaphor not only for the Catholic Church’s own traditional involvement in political affairs, but for the tendency for revolution in the Philippines to become conceived and experienced as a spiritual and religious affair.

IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE to assume some kind of specific ideological continuity between the 1898 and 2001 uprisings and the Santo Niño vendors’ protests in 2003. The vehemence with which the EDSA revolutions were waged, to be sure, were fuelled in great measure by the memories of the popular uprising that dismissed Marcos fifteen years before. Similarly, the SNSVA protesters in 2003 may well have viewed Leon Kilat’s use of Santo Niño iconography as an inspiring testament to the importance of the figure as a symbol of their plight. But to contend that twentieth century uprisings were an installment to the ‘unfinished’ revolutions before it would be to misrepresent uprisings known specifically for its “spontaneity” and the discrete circumstances upon which they were galvanized. Indeed, imagining such continuities would be an exercise in drawing causal, linear connections where no such continuities exists; eschewing an appreciation of the structural and sentimental upheavals of the events as they unfolded.
The exercise in juxtaposing the uprisings of 1898 and 2001 in this instance is significant in the heuristic sense of appreciating the instances in which religion – more specifically the iconography of religion – repeatedly contextualises popular struggle in becoming used as the idiom by which they were understood and vocalised. The conjoining of specifically powerful phrases that expressed the struggles — "Mabuhi ang Katipunan! Mabuhi ang Santo Niño" in 1898, and "Pit Señor – Erap Resign" in 2001, suggests the operation of a semantic process by which the Santo Niño became the symbol of a Cebuano contribution to events of national significance. In 2001 as in 1898, the Santo Niño functioned as a metonymy for Cebuano ‘localness’ without alienating its participants themselves from the countrywide effort. That both coincided with Christian feast days – either by design in 1898 or by way of ‘divine coincidence’ in 2001 – amplified the sense of religious significance of these popular uprisings. Inasmuch as they operated outside the officially designated jurisdictions of the Church structure, finally, these uprisings circumvented official channels of religious authority, deriving a sense of authorization directly from the Santo Niño.

In light of the broader structural and theoretical motivations of this study, the juxtaposition of historical episodes is conducted for reasons beyond highlighting ironic disparities between them, as has been the case in previous chapters. Enacting an episodic history is conducive to the ‘figuring’ of the instances where “history repeats itself”; exemplifying the capacity of symbols to transcend time and space in their amenability to interpretation. In this sense, the Sinulog rally in 2001 and Tres de Abril revolt in 1898 can both be seen as Cebuano attempts to frame, through the indelible symbol of the Santo Niño, specific discourses of identity in which Cebu City had an autonomous status vis-à-
vis other locations in the nation. Furthermore, the intervention of the Santo Niño was instrumental in laying claim to Cebuano participation in the ‘holy revolution’ – a cause which, like the protest against the Cebu City Mayor by the SNSVA, came to be construed with a sense of moral and spiritual legitimacy. The question that remains to be answered is what precisely are the constituents of a “holy” revolution? Is it enough that a large group of people make use of religious iconography such as the Santo Niño in enacting their cause? In the scheme of ‘holy’ revolutions, do icons have an autonomous sanctifying power or are they the result of active processes of legitimization by prescribed authorities? The task in the next section is to describe those forces of authorisation and authentication which serve as the prerequisites for revolutions becoming designated with holy and spiritual substance.
II

The Sacred Force of Civil Society: “People Power” as a Religious Event

In moments of stress in front of the tanks there was an appeal to group solidarity with the chant “walang aalis, walang aalis!” And through it all there was the personal participation of the Santo Niño or the Blessed Mother leading the procession. It was all very Filipino. (Bulatao 1992, 284)

BULATAO’S DEPICTION OF the events of revolution in Manila evokes a highly emotive uprising in the face of very real threats to the lives of its participants. Yet in spite of the dangers, there is a sense with which the people’s tenacity and refusal to disperse (galvanized by the calls of “walang aalis, walang aalis!” [“no one is to leave”]) is emboldened by the presence of God through the religious iconography that manifest His divine intercession. This experience of holiness, this belief in the religious legitimacy of their cause, is depicted in this passage as an indelible feature of an “all very Filipino” way of enacting protest.

The topic of this section is the means by which popular protest, in its use of religious iconography and symbolism, becomes conceived within the religious categories of “holy revolution” or “people power”. An examination of the tradition of People Power in the Philippines facilitates the analysis of the active processes by which moral legitimacy is supplied to popular action through the use of Christian iconography. The use of Christian and Marian images demonstrates that People Power was as much an experience and expression of religiosity, as it was an event of social and political upheaval. But it is important to also be sensitive to the operation of specific agendas of power that infuse its occurrence.
During the post 1986 administrations of former Presidents Corazon Aquino and Fidel Ramos, memories of popular uprisings in Manila’s main artery, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), were physically and rhetorically linked to a tradition of People Power. More than a series of protests against authoritarian and incompetent governments, People Power became conceived of as a means by which Filipinos can ensure not only the institutional and legal integrity of their leaders, but their moral and spiritual fortitude as well. The success of revolution in deposing oppressive, corrupt or incompetent regimes was made poignant by the principled nature by which it was achieved. For People Power derives its distinctiveness and symbolic efficacy as a demand for change that was achieved without bloodshed or violence (“ay kayang makamit ng walang dahas”). In this respect, a peaceful means of change (“mapayapang paraang pagbabago”) underlay a distinctive ethos of what was THE Filipino contribution to the rest of the world (“Handog ng Filipino sa Mundo”). While many continue to point to the phenomenon as indicative of the fragility of Philippine institutions, the discourse of People Power obtains its potency from the notion that these were the most potent expressions of the vox populi against a backdrop of years of repression and intolerable corruption in the highest ranks.

Religious imagery plays a central role in the propagation of People Power. The assassination of then opposition Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino in 1983 catalysed the process in which the struggle against the Marcos regime became conceived through the idiom of Christian symbols and images. Ninoy’s death had become emplotted into a national allegory that drew connections between the passion of Christ, the self-sacrifice of Jose Rizal, the ‘dark age’ that was Martial Law, and Ninoy himself as the latest in a
pantheon of modern day martyrs. His position in this pantheon, a sacred and nationalistic act posthumously enacted, was well and truly ascertained by his most poignant (almost prophetic) pronouncement that “the Filipino is worth dying for”.

Cardinal Sin, during Ninoy’s funeral, had consummated the religious overtone of his martyrdom in describing him as “as a Filipino pilgrim whose journey had cost him his life”. (Cf. Ileto 1998, 170) In response to his calls made in defiance of the Marcos regime, over two million Filipinos had attended the ‘martyr Ninoy’s’ funeral. His body -- bloodied and unwashed in an open casket -- exerted a kind of symbolic violence against the excesses of the Marcos dictatorship. As such, it effected a re-deflection of the sheer brutality of his assassination back onto the regime, symbolizing an indictment on its abuses of power. Indeed, Ninoy’s corpse itself compelled a kind of self-pity (awa) among those who viewed it, inasmuch as it bore the brunt of the collective plight of the Filipino. Just as Christ had died to redeem the world, then, mourning Aquino became an exercise of Filipino empathy (damay), embedding a discourse in which his construction as a martyr was, to cite Ileto, “almost too easily done” (1998, 170).

The religious overtone of the 1986 People Power revolution against the Marcos regime was epitomized by the potent image of nuns and priests in the front lines of the human barricades, and defecting generals holding up the pictures of Ninoy before the assembled crowd. In February, Cardinal Sin called on the faithful to amass at EDSA through radio broadcasts carried on the Church operated Radio Veritas, invoking the uprising as inspired by the “power of the Rosary”. With the eventual overthrow of Marcos (to be sure, facilitated by factors not exclusively religious), a shrine marked by a huge statue of the Virgin Mary was erected along the main thoroughfare. “Our Lady of
ESDA” stands overlooking the mass of vehicles that daily congest the corner of Ortigas and EDSA, both as commemoration of the tradition of People Power and as a focal point for future prayer rallies. “EDSA shrine” became the most tangible indicator of the intimate link between popular protest and iconic religiosity in the Philippines, furnishing a visually compelling reminder of the capacity of the Catholic Church to both galvanize and legitimize popular mass action. In this regard, it can be said that the first People Power revolution was a victory not just for Corazon Aquino (herself an iconic representation of the embattled widow), but for the Philippine Catholic Church as an institution. For the commemorative erection of the EDSA Shrine had literally cemented its place as an institution which defines and sanctifies the iconography of radical change in the nation. Indeed, it would not be long before its status as such would once again be put to the test.

EDSA Dos

The Corazon Aquino government faced numerous challenges to the mandate conferred upon it by People Power, some of which in the form of violent coup attempts orchestrated by erstwhile trusted cohorts in the EDSA revolution. Yet far from diminishing the legitimacy of the EDSA tradition, the threats to the stability of her government fuelled the significance of the religious dynamics that propelled it to power. In this regard, EDSA was packaged as an “unfinished” revolution that required Filipinos to remain vigilant about the active process of preserving its spirit and that of the martyr

Ninoy. In 2001, the symbolic force of People Power was again invoked in protest of the administration of President Joseph Estrada. Like the first People Power, its sequel was likewise strongly marked with Marian iconography that contextualised the protest, which were again concentrated in the surrounds of the EDSA shrine (Figure 5.1). In 2001, “EDSA Dos” [EDSA Two] preceded the disintegration of President Estrada’s impeachment trial. Propelled by telecommunications technology (specifically by text messages on cellular telephones) EDSA Dos was the gathering of largely middle class constituents organized under various “Civil Society” groups demanding the resignation of a man who had lost his moral and professional credibility. Like its predecessor, EDSA Dos was marked by the ‘defection’ of key government officials particularly from the military whose support for Vice President Arroyo and the United Opposition proved the turning point of the protest. EDSA Dos was an event that saw the mobilization of those who knew that in gathering together en masse, they were invoking a romanticized ‘tradition’ that had a precedent of success based on an appeal to moral and spiritual propriety.
Also like its predecessor, EDSA Dos was defined by its relative non-violence. The congregation of the crowd was based not on the desire for retribution or violent confrontation but, rather, upon the expectation of the reinstatement of a justice ‘aborted’ during the impeachment trial. It was a case of what Rafael (2003), citing Derrida, has called “messianic politics” – one that awaited a coming of an outcome that, in being always deferred, was free from any specific technical or political determination. It was, significantly, galvanized by means of a specific technology – text messages over cell phones -- that were in a sense messianic in that it came from a source unknown, yet always expected. Held, as it was, in the nation’s capital, EDSA Dos became mythologised as the focal point of other concurrent uprisings around the nation. Its ‘holiness’ was in large measure a function of the ways in which it was contextualised by the iconographies of Christianity, and by the fact that they transpired in close proximity to the sanctified space of the EDSA shrine.

In this respect, EDSA Dos was the fulfillment of a kind of divine prophesy which began with Ninoy Aquino’s assassination and one which could only be legitimately
delivered by a ‘chosen’ constituency. Carroll S.J. (1995), in commenting upon the
significance of the “unfinished” revolution of 1986, described the significance of such
“intermediary institutions” of non-governmental groups as the crucial element in
bringing about “holy” EDSA revolutions:

But what human agent will the Lord use to complete the revolution, to bring about
the realization of the dreams for which thousands went to the hills in the dark
days of the dictator, hundreds died under torture, and thousands faced tanks at
EDSA? I would suggest that the agent will be neither the Church nor State as
such, nor indeed ‘the people’, meaning the unorganized masses… The agent may
well be what is coming to be called ‘civil society’ meaning organized groups
outside the formal political sphere but concerned about public issues. (1985, 235)

This statement, made as it was five years before the outbreak of EDSA Dos, framed the
prophetic undertones of middle-class contributions to the revolution. In extracting Civil
Society from “the people, meaning the unorganised masses”, Carroll imbues it with an
autonomous sense of agency in being aware of the need for change, and having the means
and technologies to enact it. During the EDSA revolutions, Civil Society became the
legitimate bearers of the iconography of the revolution, possessing the exclusive right to
wield it with political effect. It is in this sense that the revolutions of 1986 and 2001
represented the “sacred force of Civil Society”, effectively excluding “the people” from
making use of the religious symbols that transformed revolutions into religious and
spiritual affairs.

Ever since the first 1986 revolution, Civil Society and the Church organization
had upheld the notion that People Power can only occur under very specific
circumstances, and conducted by constituents who had a morally valid agenda. But
what happens when a people’s use of iconography is outside the official dictates of those

THE REBELLION AND THE ICON 204
in power? What are the effects of 'the people' themselves making use of the religious images over which Civil Society had a monopolised privilege? The questions asked here extend from those discussed in the first section — can there be a legitimate People Power (in all its holy configurations) without the Church's officially designated sanction? From where does this significance come from? Later in 2001, the issue of the improper use of People Power as a religious and political category was placed into sharp focus and it is to this that the discussion shall now turn.

“EDSA Tres”: The Revolt of the ‘Great Unwashed’

The rewiring of EDSA has long begun. But we who were there will not allow them to get away with it. (Benigno 1995)

The pronouncement above, by a respected Filipino newspaper columnist on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the First People Power, evokes a group of people who act as guardians of the tradition of divinely-sanctioned protest. Expressive, as it is, of the mission under which they operate, the statement affirms that the propagation of this tradition involved an active process of affirmation and denunciation, designating which mass actions can be legitimately and deservedly included among it. But it also expresses a sense of foreboding about the volatility of the business of 'holy' revolutions—mindful of the possibility that EDSA or People Power may also be used for purposes outside of those in which it was originally conceived.

The ouster of President Estrada led to his indictment and imprisonment by April 2001. Yet the “People Power Coalition” that had assumed government had
underestimated the lingering appeal of the deposed former president. Smuggled mug-
shots of Estrada and his son in jail engendered a wave of sympathy for a man who was
deemed by many of the poor to have been unjustly treated. The comparison of Estrada’s
plight with the passion of Christ became evident over talkback radio and ‘man on the
street’ opinion polls. For Estrada’s supporters remained loyal to him upon a sense of
empathy [damay] towards his plight. Ever mindful of the former movie actor’s cinematic
persona, Estrada’s Christ-like Fall and “crucifixion” was the basis upon which opposition
politicians marshaled Estrada’s traditional support base of disgruntled poor – those
supposedly “ignorant” underclass of citizens who have come to be known as the ‘great
unwashed’. It was these kinds of people who amassed beneath the EDSA Shrine in May
2001, comprising what its instigators immediately called EDSA Tres [EDSA Three].

If there is a sense of orthodoxy or even deviancy in Philippine politics, it comes
from the extraordinary role of the religious masa (masses) in inciting protest and
influencing change, as Ileto (2001) and Rafael (2003) have observed. Mindful of the
symbolic force of religious iconographies of revolutions and the tradition of People
Power, a large and boisterous crowd of Estrada sympathizers had started to gather at
EDSA and maintained vigil at the Virgin Mary’s statue -- ironically, the very site of
earlier mass action that had deposed the person whose plight they were petitioning. The
backbone of the pro-Erap forces were members of the Iglesia Ni Kristo (Church of
Christ) and the charismatic El Shaddai movement: both indigenous Christian churches
with whom Estrada had typically fostered favorable relations. The initial several hundred
who had gathered by the shrine grew to several thousand, literally by the truckload as
Estrada supporters in the provinces arrived to join the vigil. Leaders of Estrada’s Pwersa
ng Masa (Power of the Masses) coalition, led among others by Estrada’s wife, Loi Ejercito, incited the masa by urging them to stay in EDSA until justice is given to their idol. By late April, the bused-in crowd had swelled to close to a million people who cheered as PMP Senatorial candidate Panfilo Lacson declared their activity “Edsa Tres” and those assembled at the Shrine, as the “force of the masses” (Figure 5.2).

By 1 May, the crowd was prompted to march to Mendiola and storm Malacañang Palace to demand for Estrada’s release. The protesters, chanting "Sigaw ng Pilipinas, ibalik si Erap!" [“Cry of the nation, bring back Erap!”], looted shops and clashed with police resulting in four deaths and several injured. Amidst a very real threat to her personal safety, a clearly exasperated Arroyo went on national television and declared a State of Rebellion.
As opposed to the “sacred force of Civil Society” that comprised the first two People Power revolutions, the rebellion at EDSA shrine in May 2001 was not imbued with the same spiritual sanctity. The majority of the media chastised the EDSA Tres crowd’s behaviour as ‘undisciplined’, ‘rowdy’ or ‘volatile’. The immediate reaction of the middle class was that Estrada, charged with pocketing more than $82 million in ill-gotten wealth, had paid protesters between five-hundred and three thousand pesos to join the rebellion. The protests were being depicted as the first installment in a drawn-out campaign to get Estrada out of jail, elicit sympathy for his party and force Arroyo out of power. Its close to a million constituents were identified as a mob with no political or moral will of their own, but were rather instruments manipulated by opposition politicians who sought to take advantage of their credulity, destitution and disgruntlement.

The burgeoning crowd at EDSA became increasingly identified not only for their material depravity, but for their moral depravity as well. The Archdiocese of Manila expressed its outrage at the way protesters made use of the EDSA shrine as an icon of their protest. News media depicted Estrada loyalists climbing up the roof of the shrine from where they chanted pro-Estrada slogans and hurled obscenities at Cardinal Sin himself. The loyalists were shown spray-paining the walls of the shrine with the name of the deposed president. They also superimposed over the name of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo on the marble slab at the foot of the Shrine commemorating the victory of People Power. Churchgoers interviewed on television reported of the pungent smell of urine ("mapanghi") emanating from the Shrine's indoor gardens, suggesting that the rallyists had been urinating into the garden from above. In interpreting their
behaviour, commentators suggested many of the loyalists were high on *shabu* (local amphetamines). Reports of their ‘desecration’ of the EDSA shrine overshadowed the grievances of the close to a million loyalists. Beyond being a protest against the current administration, EDSA Tres was seen by civil society groups and the Church hierarchy as a blatant disregard for the religious and symbolic tradition of People Power. As such, their gathering was an invalid, indeed repugnant, use of religious iconography and one that effectively invalidated any moral or spiritual entitlements to their cause.

Differences between Edsa Dos and Edsa Tres became seen as going beyond the tautological comparison of political grievances. In the end, those differences came to be conceived of as moral, not political in nature. The first two People Power revolutions were gatherings of a materially indignant people against a morally bankrupt government, while EDSA Tres was an episode where a morally legitimate government was threatened by the emotional and misguided actions of a materially bankrupt constituency. Here at work was something that resembled what Ileto has described as the “other politics” that “has never experienced being the center, the state”. The force that gathered in EDSA Tres had no voice as such, but was rather peripheral to national and elite expectations and agendas (Ileto 2001). In the end, the legitimacy of the grievances of those who rose up in EDSA Tres was refuted by the perception of their utter credulity. The mass action of the “unwashed” was the result of a political stunt by scheming politicians who galvanized a mob still captivated by the wily charisma of a deposed president. Subsequently, the mob insurrection was bound to fizzle out due to the ethical depravity of both its constituents and its cause. Civil society groups, the media and political commentators were loathe to
associate it with the tradition of the previous two “people power” revolutions, in spite of repeated arguments to this effect.

Foremost in this denial of spiritual legitimacy was the ‘unauthorised’ use of the iconography of protest, the EDSA shrine. In this regard, perceptions of the EDSA Tres mob calls to mind that of anti-Spanish revolutionaries in 1896 who had likewise engaged in the ‘illicit’ use of Christian iconography. Panfilo Lacson’s description of those gathered at EDSA Tres as “pwersa ng masa” [force of the masses] derived its symbolic force from a tacit reference to the embattled heroicism epitomized by the Katipunan struggle. The Tagalog uprising of the Katipunan, itself led by an “unwashed” plebian named Andres Bonifacio, called for Kalayaan [freedom] through the idiom of the pasyon of Christ. Civil society composed of the foreign educated ilustrados had also condemned a cause that they perceived as a mob driven by the passions of an oppressed people, rather an uprising invested with any serious political cogency. As such, these insurrectos and banditos were semantically and physically excluded from the realms of what was ‘legitimate’ and divinely sanctioned patriotic duty. Just as this was so for the revolutionaries of the Katipunan, so too were the mob at EDSA Tres physically prevented from making use of religious iconography for such ‘illegal’ and ‘illicit’ purposes (Figure 5.3).
The protest was eventually quelled after government forces contained weary protesters. Yet in some important ways, EDSA Tres had succeeded in placing great pressure in the Church as an institution. In the previous two EDSAs, the Church had taken a definite and active stance against clearly perceived ‘enemies’ of moral decency, not just of good governance. In EDSA Tres, however, the enemy was a large segment of the poor, ostensibly under the direction of unscrupulous politicians. This time, the ‘enemy’ were the very souls that the Church had been mandated to save and protect. The sheer volume of their numbers, and the vehemence with which they voiced disapproval to the status quo, compelled Church leaders to consider EDSA Tres as a veritable spiritual crisis. For the first time, the iconographies of protest were being used for purposes which they had not commissioned, thereby posing a challenge to the very notion of People Power as a religious and political category. Eventually, the Archdiocese of Manila found it necessary to take some action by admitting that this “misuse” of iconography was indicative of a spiritual affliction for which they were partly responsible.
In June 2001, the Catholic Church made an official apology for its “neglect of the poor” who rose up in EDSA Tres. This was not an act of contrition that acknowledged any moral credence to the ‘folk’s’ actions. Cardinal Sin himself, rather, expressed it through the metaphor of a parent who had been too busy to ensure the good behaviour of his children. In this neglect, the children had consequently transgressed the boundaries of moral decency, culminating in the ‘mass tantrum’ at EDSA to draw attention. In so doing, they had made illicit and irresponsible use of a very potent icon of protest, the EDSA shrine. Of this charge, the poor were constructed as objects who needed salvation and guidance, rather than as a constituency with a justifiable grievance of which the government must take heed. While on the surface the Church had taken some responsibility for the events of EDSA Tres, the apology did not construe the uprising as a political or religious indictment on the nation’s leaders, but as an outburst of a wayward child who must be tolerated and indulged.

This characterization of the masses at EDSA had the effect of disassociating their plight from that of Civil Society in the previous two People Power revolutions. For in spite of the apology’s noblesse oblige, it failed to ascribe to the ‘folk’ any sense of political or religious agency, likening it instead to the actions of those “who knew not what they do”. Like the conception of ‘syncretism’ as an expression of immutable cultural and psychological motivations (as we discussed in the previous chapter), the amassed crowd were depicted as acting passionately upon the dictates of their ontology, governed as that was by their failure to truly understand the magnitude of their actions. Indeed, while their very credulity absolved them of any real ‘guilt’, it was also this that disqualified the legitimacy of their grievances. Their ‘unauthorised’ use of religious
iconography, therefore, was domesticated in the apology as no more than the badly
behaved action of children who needed guidance and not accusation. As Dequiros (2001)
observed:

The depiction of the throng at EDSA III as wayward children continues to deface
[the EDSA shrine], or the bigger shrine which is the nation itself, by robbing it of
faces and putting masks in their place. The mask of a lost flock, the mask of a
bovine herd, the mask of innocent, or ignorant, 'folk' who may not be listened to
seriously but only humored and led. It is a very patronizing view of the very real,
flesh-and-blood, people who went to EDSA III with hunger in their bellies and
anger in their hearts. (Dequiros 2001a, 16 May)

THE FOCUS OF THIS CHAPTER has not been to evaluate the ethical or moral rationale
of revolutions in their use of religious iconography. The concern here has been to trace
the discursive and rhetorical processes that foreground what may be called "People
Power" or "Holy revolution." The two sections of this chapter have demonstrated that
the continued association of popular uprising with divine intervention is the result of an
absolute and authoritative power of legitimisation, exemplified superbly by the
implications of Cardinal Sin's apology. In this sense, at least, a historical revisiting of
"holy revolutions" show that the Roman Catholic Church has never been more relevant in
the lives of Filipinos in the struggle for change.

Indeed, on a doctrinal level, "holiness" is ostensibly revealed by God Himself
through to the scripture. But as these "holy" uprisings show, there are certain other
avenues through which God speaks; avenues in which revolution becomes both a
religious and subversive affair. In the second section was demonstrated how the Church
creates and sustains the conditions in which People Power is experienced as a religious
event. Indeed, mass action is not construed as People Power by sheer consensus alone, as the example of the ‘unauthorised’ revolution of EDSA Tres (whose constituency outnumbered the two revolutions that preceded it) showed. Rather, People Power comes into being as a religious category only after it is called into action by the prescribed authority, in this case the indelible Cardinal Sin. Otherwise, mass uprisings — their invocation of Holy iconography notwithstanding — is discursively relegated and excluded from being called People Power, thereby divesting it of any claim to moral or spiritual legitimacy. The purpose of the second section was to argue that “holiness” in the Philippines is not an innate feature of an icon, or inherent in the cognitive mental structures of those devoted to them. It is, rather, based upon traceable acts of authority; upon active processes of designation and ‘legitimisation’.

Yet having said this, there is a danger in overestimating Church’s powers of legitimization, particularly in light of the persuasive appeal of alternative religious movements in the Philippines. The Tres de Abril revolution and EDSA Tres — themselves motivated by folk Christian systems of belief or buttressed by their constituency — are examples in this regard. These were uprisings that were motivated by sensibilities that contravened the prevailing and ‘official’ Church ethos, seeking instead to foster a holy revolution without the consent of the arbiters of the nation’s religious meanings. Ironically, it is the Church’s designation of these movements as ‘unauthorised’ or ‘illicit’ that delimits their discursive jurisdiction. It is from these limits that people’s religious agency — their ‘sensationalism’ or ‘flamboyance’, if you will — begins to be seen. In the ‘free’ and ‘unofficial’ appropriation of the Santo Niño and the Virgin Mary, the folk were able to articulate their own revolutionary sensibilities in direct
opposition to the prevailing social order, and in ways that the Church nor the Colonial/State government could not foresee. As Mojares insightfully suggests, the use of icons in the Philippines "reminds us that the power to generate meanings, or make them general, is not wholly free nor equally distributed. Symbols become efficacious not just because of their material properties or by how they are imagined but by who does the imagining" (Mojares 2002, 161).

Just as the Santo Niño vendors were aware of the capacity of the icon to infuse their protest with a spiritual clout, so too were the masses at EDSA cognizant of the significance of demonstrating near the icon of Our Lady of EDSA. As such, there is perhaps a sense of poignancy in comparing the Cebu Mayor's recanting on the "dumping" of Santo Niño replicas, and Cardinal Sin's 'apology' to the poor at EDSA. For they too, in the end, were sensitive to the volatility in which popular uprisings are constructed as 'holy', indicating that "revolution" is itself a political field of symbolic and semantic contestation. Indeed, as has been demonstrated in many other ways throughout this study, religious iconography so often constitutes the battle-ground in which such contestations are conceived and played out. These are contestations, however, that are also manifested in how Filipinos remember their past through the 'soul-searching' of a nations' literature and history. It is to these instances of the Santo Niño's 'figuring' that the final chapter shall turn.