

## **An Ethnographic Sketch of Church Vendors: Peddling Hope in a Hopeless World?**

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### **Introduction: Church vendors as part of the informal sector**

With our predominantly Catholic population, churches all over the country often become quasi-centers of commerce during Sundays and special days of devotion. The presence of vendors within the vicinity of churches is as commonplace as the appearance of the Catholic faithful. These vendors represent but a small portion of what has come to be known as the informal sector—we see them everywhere though we barely acknowledge their contribution to the economy. The lack of recognition stems from society's own tendency to favor salaried workers in the formal sector, which consequently lead to neglect of the informal sector in terms of social protection and providing access to education, health, financial and other welfare services. In spite of this skewed perception, however, there is no doubt that the informal sector provides livelihood opportunities for people who have difficulty or are unable to find employment within the formal arrangements of the economy.

The workers in the informal sector (WIS) are often described as poor individuals who operate businesses that are very small in scale and are not registered with any national government

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agency; or those in such enterprises who sell their services in exchange for subsistence level wages or other forms of compensation. They are engaged in such undertakings as ambulant vending; as alternative/small transport drivers; in home-based and home services such as carpentry, laundry, plumbing, scrap collecting and gathering; and in agricultural works such as farming and fishing, among others. It is noted that workers in the informal sector continue to grow over the years, which is not uncommon among developing countries. The Department of Labor and Employment estimates that the informal sector comprises 65% of the country's workforce. This translates to about 20 million WIS out of the 35 million workers in the labor force in 2006.

Indeed, the informal sector is not as invisible as it may seem. In 2002, the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB), through Resolution No. 15, even adopted an official conceptual definition of the informal sector as consisting of "units engaged in the production of goods and services with the primary objective of generating employment and incomes to the persons concerned in order to earn a living." Such units operate at a low level of organization with little or no division between labor and capital. They consist of household unincorporated enterprises that are market and non-market producers of goods or market producers of services. Labor relations, if existent, is based on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than formal or contractual arrangements. For statistical purposes, however, informal sector in its operational definition shall refer to household unincorporated enterprises which consist of both informal own-account enterprises and enterprises of informal employers.

Interestingly, the informal sector is regarded as beneficiaries of various government policies and programs. For instance, the term "informal sector" is mentioned eight times in the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) 2004-2010 in provisions covering such concerns as socialized and low-cost housing; social assistance/protection; capability-building; lessening of marginalization by social, economic and environmental pressures, as well as by natural disasters and economic shocks; access to capital; and land distribution. Likewise, the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) includes workers in the informal sector as among the 14 basic/disadvantaged sectors of society that are targeted by the agency's poverty alleviation programs. In partnership with NAPC, government financial institutions like the Social Security System (SSS) and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) extend various programs for the social security

and capital needs of WIS. Moreover, DOLE has several programs aimed at providing social protection and livelihood assistance for WIS such as the *Unlad Kabuhayan Program Laban sa Kahirapan* or the DOLE Worktrep Program launched just recently to improve the socio-economic well-being of the poor self-employed workers in the informal sector through training, business advisory, social protection and networking services.

Despite such programs and considering the number of WIS, it seems that the challenges faced in providing assistance and social protection is staggering. Somehow, a closer look is needed for a better understanding of the situation of these workers. Thus, this paper intends to present the socio-economic situation of the informal sector at the micro-level, particularly the church vendors.

### **A description of their workplace**

For this study, casual interviews were conducted with three vendors at the St. Jude Archdiocesan Shrine located inside the Malacañang complex. The shrine, a popular site of devotion, represents hope to many Catholic faithful who flock the church every Thursday to pray for the intercession of the patron saint of lost causes. What strikes this researcher is how these vendors of religious items in the area are able to view life with hope and optimism despite living in a condition of perennial crisis.

The St. Jude Archdiocesan Shrine is dedicated to St. Jude Thaddeus who, in Church tradition, is believed to be a cousin of Jesus himself and is venerated as the patron saint of desperate or impossible cases. The letter of St. Jude, the last epistle in the New Testament, calls upon the faithful to persevere in the environment of harsh and difficult circumstances, just as their forefathers had done before them. Many devotees, in response, seek his intercession in desperate situations by visiting his shrine during Thursdays—the saints designated day of devotion.

### **The church vendors**

The interviews were conducted on September 14, 2006, which was a Thursday. The respondents were randomly selected from among the vendors in the vicinity who sell various goods including religious items. As usual, many employees and students from Malacañang and nearby offices and schools visited the church

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and its surrounding area to say their prayers and recite their novenas, or simply to buy food and vegetables that are sold at prices cheaper than in the regular markets.

### 1. *Manong Rene*

Meet Manong Rene. His spot is probably the most strategic as it is located right in the corner of the road junction where most devotees pass through before they enter the church courtyard. But he is not occupying the spot all by himself; he shares it with other vendors selling such items as religious materials, food or beverages. He did not hesitate when he was asked to sit for an interview. I learned later that he is already accustomed to such encounter, having been interviewed several times by college students. Nothing in him, not even his dark complexion, betrays his age except his toothless grin. It came not so surprising, therefore, when he admitted he is already 63 years old. But one could swear just by looking at him that he is still in his late forties.

Manong Rene has been selling religious articles in the St. Jude church area for almost 40 years already. His life in the shrine began in 1968 when he first came to Manila lured by the promise of luck that awaits him in the metropolis. Manong Rene hails from Pangasinan and finished only his secondary studies, never even reaching college. A resident of San Miguel, Manila, Manong Rene has five children, one of which graduated from a Mendiola-based university and is already working. The rest of his children have not even gone beyond college but started to have families of their own. He already has ten grandchildren. Unlike other vendors in the area who sell their wares only on Thursdays, Manong Rene is one of the so-called regulars—he tends to a sari-sari store the rest of the week. While his wife works voluntarily for the archdiocese during Thursdays, Manong Rene tends to their small store located just two meters away from where he sells his religious articles and candles. All throughout the interview, Manong Rene would move constantly from his sari-sari store to the stall where he sells the religious items, entertaining buyers and onlookers.

Candles are probably among the most common of religious items associated with devotees of St. Jude. Candles are classified into nine colors according to the purpose of intercession: 1) yellow for general wishes, 2) pink for love, 3) white for purity and

enlightenment, 4) green for finances, 5) brown for health, 6) peach for studies, 7) red for peace and hope, 8) blue for career, and 9) violet for spiritual intentions. According to Manong Rene, peach, brown and green colored candles are some of his bestsellers. Peach candles are popular because there are many students who visit the church and attend one of the several scheduled masses during Thursdays. The church is just across the College of the Holy Spirit, one of the four Mendiola-based schools in Manila's university-belt area. As to brown and green candles, this is not so surprising considering that financial and health concerns are common to most Filipinos.

In the years he spent selling in the area, the most pressing problem Manong Rene encounters is the constant threat of eviction from the spot where he earns his living. One time the newly assigned parish priest even called the cops to have them arrested and barred from selling in the area. Manong Rene has heard the church's sermon several times, of how Jesus Christ himself fumed over the vendors in the synagogue. Manong Rene would reply saying that what infuriated Christ was not the way small people like himself are earning an honest living but how some people have turned the house of God into a marketplace.

Another problem he encounters is the lack of financial resources, which constrains him to borrow occasionally from Indian lenders<sup>1</sup> who are notorious for their usurious practices. Manong Rene would often complain about how times have changed for the worst, and how prices of commodities have skyrocketed. As for his family and their state of health, Manong Rene admitted being worried about the phaseout of the Malacañang Clinic<sup>2</sup> upon which they relied heavily for free medical services and medicine for many years.

Asked about what he would wish for if he were to light a candle for St. Jude, Manong Rene said he usually prays for his family's health, stable source of funds, and to be able to sell their wares in the area without fear of being harassed by authorities. He said that the local government has done nothing to help them in their predicament. Yet, he counts himself lucky that by being in the area long enough, he already knows how to handle threats directed to them by the police, the military, and MMDA personnel.

In one of our informal discussions on current social and political issues, Manong Rene quipped "*mas magaling pa ang tatay na presidente*" (the president father was better). He was making a comparison that the elder Pres. Diosdado Macapagal is far better

than her daughter who is now at the helm of the country. From time to time, he would casually say that things are actually getting worse, particularly in the lives of people like him who have to work hard just to be able to eat from day to day. But in spite of the hardships he faced in life, he says he never loses hope and continues to look forward to that day when the President would visit the church so that they may be able to air their problems and ask for direct assistance. When that happens he hopes that they will not be driven away. He admits that he would always wave his hand in the direction of the President's car, which passes by almost every day. He also recalls how generous former First Lady Imelda Marcos was, whom he says always found time to talk to poor, and gave them food and cash for their daily subsistence. History books has depicted a certain image of former president Marcos but Manong Rene keeps a different picture in his memory, one that is not easy to disregard.

## *2. Manang Jolly*

Across the other side of the road opposite Manong Rene and very near the church facade is the stall of Manang Jolly. Like Manong Rene, she is also one of the regulars and operates a sari-sari store nearby. Just halfway through her interview and one can already notice that there is really not much difference between their lives. Like Manong Rene, she finished only high school. She also lives near the church. At 56 years old, she has six children and ten grandchildren. She lost two of her children and is a widow for twelve years. I opted not to expound at this point, to avoid rekindling sad memories.

Manang Jolly started selling religious items in the area when her husband died twelve years ago. This enabled her to finance the education of her remaining children. One was able to finish a computer technician course and is now working in a popular fast-food chain. Two are still in college. Whenever the younger children have no classes, they sometimes assist their mother in attending to their sari-sari store. Manang Jolly also told me that her deceased husband used to work at the maintenance section of Malacañang's engineering office. For several years, therefore, her family was able to avail of the medical services offered by the Malacañang Clinic. But like Manong Rene, she is also wary about the rumored transfer of the Malacañang Clinic to the headquarters of the Presidential Security Group (PSG) across the Pasig River. She

added that the local government provides medical services only once a year through barangay medical missions.

Manang Jolly says the vendors are concerned about the new parish priest and his policies regarding peddling in the area. She says they are also in constant fear of being harassed by the police. Also, they see no visible help from the local government unit regarding their plight, especially their common problem of finding financial resources. Just like Manong Rene and most other vendors, Manang Jolly occasionally is left with no choice but to accept the terms of the Indian lenders during times of immediate need. Barely surviving, Manang Jolly can only be glad “nakakatawid pa rin sila kahit papaano” (that at least they can still make it through each day).

According to Manang Jolly, the most popular candles bought are those colored peach, green and brown, representing concerns that she herself would ask St. Jude’s to intercede, especially for her children and their families.

### 3. *Manang Pening*

Not very far from Manang Jolly’s sari-sari store is a display of religious items that seem different compared to those sold by most vendors in the area. While many vendors display an array of colors due to the wide variety of colored candles, Manang Pening offers only few candles that are already prepackaged into nine color combinations. Her display is comprised mostly of novenas, miniature statues of saints, and rosary beads. Manang Pening would probably be in her late forties or early fifties. She has four children; three are still in school, while the eldest is now working for an airline company after finishing an economics degree at a private university (Far Eastern University) in the nearby Morayta area.

In contrast with the other respondents, Manang Pening is not a regular and is one of the so-called ‘*dayo*.’ The likes of Manang Pening actually outnumber the regulars during Thursdays. They include those who sell cooked food, fruits, vegetables, and other products one can usually buy from the market. The *dayos* are the usual targets of police officers assigned to extricate vendors from getting too near the church premises. But for selling goods at typically cheaper prices they are also the reason why people, especially those who work in the government and private

institutions nearby, flock to the St. Jude church every Thursday. Manang Pening and her husband sells in the area, only during Thursdays and goes to other churches during the other days—sometimes in Baclaran on Wednesdays and Quiapo on Fridays, or in the churches of nearby towns and barangays during religious fiesta celebrations. Her husband also tends to some non-religious materials they sell to augment their earnings. She has been selling religious wares at the St. Jude church for almost twenty years, a trade she claimed to have inherited from her mother. Manang Pening and her husband live in nearby Sampaloc and peddle their goods at the St. Jude church area more frequently than in any other place.

Manang Pening openly admits that they are paying a certain amount (40 pesos) every Thursday to the barangay chairman. At the same time “may mga pulis na nangongotong” (there are also cops extorting petty sums), referring to crooked members of the police force who collect so-called protection money from vendors so their goods will not be confiscated. This is a usual predicament by vendors without permits to operate or conduct business in the area. In terms of capital, Manang Pening says that she is fortunate for having a Chinese businessman for supplier who does business based on years of mutual trust cultivated by her mother. She also mentioned about a short-lived cooperative enterprise initiated by the DSWD office in nearby Legarda Street, which proved to be quite helpful in the short run. Thus, she only borrows from Indian lenders during times of extreme emergencies. As to their access to health facilities, residing near a private university hospital enabled them to enjoy the charity medical services it makes available to indigents from time-to-time. She also avails of the free consultations and medicine offered at the Malacañang Clinic. She, too, was concerned about plans to close the clinic and limit its services to Malacañang employees.

### **Analysis**

That Thursday morning, the vendors within the vicinity of the St. Jude Archdiocesan Shrine would probably number at least 40, and include those who sell goods other than religious articles (i.e., *kakanin*, *sampaguita*, *pamaypay*, vegetables, seafood, etc.). There are vendors who are old enough to be enjoying their retirement age if they were in the formal sector, while others are too young they should be at school. Some young vendors are helping their mothers; some are simply on their own. The vendors

typically fall at an age bracket characterized by having a family, just like the three respondents.

These vendors mirror what is typical of those who are in the informal sector and those who hail from the most impoverished sections of our society. They operate with no business permits but manage just the same through local government units that find irregular ways of taxing them while purportedly maintaining cleanliness and order in the area. Their businesses require less capital. The meager income they earn, however, would barely be enough to sustain their families' basic needs. Oftentimes, they have to dig deep into their revolving capital just to cover the expenses for their bare necessities. Many are forced to borrow money from Indian lenders just to keep their business afloat despite the exorbitant rates these unscrupulous lenders charge. As far as vendors are concerned, the latter are the most accessible—they require neither collateral nor documentary requirements unlike many formal financial institutions. The result, however, is that the borrower-vendors are trapped in a cycle where they simply operate just to survive from day-to-day, and save just so they can repay their loans. Come another moment of dire need, they succumb to the same unfortunate predicament.

In terms of educational attainment, vendors are usually at the high school level. As such, many are not qualified for jobs in the formal sector. This may explain why many have decided to engage in their small business. While some of them are able to send their children to school, there are only few who are actually able to finance the education of all their offspring up to the college level. It is already a great achievement even if only one child is able to obtain a college degree, as can be seen in the cases of the herein respondents.

Access to health services is typically lacking for those employed in the informal sector. It is fortunate that the respondents live near the Malacañang complex where there is a clinic that caters to the underprivileged. One respondent simply relies on the charity wards of private hospitals, which may not be available at all times. This points clearly to the total lack of health services among our local government units. Luck run short though for the Malacañang Clinic was recently downsized and most of its doctors, dentists, nurses and other health professionals were either assigned to cater only to OP employees, or transferred to the PSG headquarters beyond the reach of its indigent clients.

## Recommendations

Overall, what struck the researcher is the interplay of institutions in the area vis-à-vis the vendor-respondents and the informal sector workers in general. The vendors are beaming with hope. There is the St. Jude Archdiocesan Shrine, which, as a representative of the predominant Catholic Church, has guided the lives, spiritual or otherwise, of its faithful devotees. As an afterthought, the renovation as well as the construction of an additional floor for the pastoral and social center of the archdiocese is proof that blessings will come to those who are always hopeful. The irony perhaps is on how this center may be able to help those who subsist from selling various goods and items within the church grounds.

Then there is Malacañang Palace and the Office of the President, which are supposed to serve as the people's representatives in the so-called social contract. As the center of government and power from which we stake the future of the nation, they are expected to execute laws and policies that govern the lives of the people. In addition, the Manila City Hall which provide direct assistance to its local constituents is just nearby. Also, there is the greater university-belt area, which symbolizes the hope for a better future for their children. A child who finishes college is already a crowning glory for many of these vendors. Add to this the presence of the St. Jude Catholic School at the back of the church. More of a Chinese school than a parochial school, its students consist mainly of children of wealthy Chinese-Filipino families who chose the school for the sense of security its location provides. This would probably explain why the name of the Shrine in the church façade has a translation in the Chinese language.

The informal sector may be considered somewhat invisible but, as in the case of the subject vendors, they are exactly right in the center of the institutions to which they pin their hopes. For many of these institutions, there seems to be a reluctant acceptance of the existence of the informal sector. The church, while tolerating their operation, is sometimes leaning towards what is pleasing to the eyes of its benefactors (i.e., Chinese-Filipinos). What the church should do is have a concrete program that will address arrangements for the vendors so that they will no longer encroach upon church grounds and operate instead in a duly designated area near the church.

Meanwhile, the educational institutions should find ways to extend their services to those who need further training for skills enhancement. Asking them to reorient their academic programs may be too much but more emphasis should be placed on social responsibility rather than performance in licensure examinations or on securing jobs after graduation. Our society is becoming less caring, placing importance on individual achievements rather than having a sense of community among its people.

The national government, as always, tends to be biased towards the formal sector since importance is placed on the more visible and direct contributions to the government coffers in terms of income tax returns. Thus, programs and policies of the government are generally geared towards the formal sector. Meanwhile, those in the informal economy are marginalized and left undeveloped with nothing even in terms of social protection. What the national government should do is address the needs of those in the informal sector by providing access to lending institutions and assurance of education and health through legislations and programs that will transcend administrations and provide guidance for future administrators. It should do away with 'band-aid' solutions and the myriad of uncoordinated programs that look promising when elections are nearing, but eventually lose steam and lead to ineffective and incomplete policy-directions.

There is also a need to place more responsibility to the local government units (LGUs). The LGUs are in a better position to understand the situation of those in the informal sector. As such, they can do a better job of planning programs and projects in accordance with the actual needs of their target beneficiaries. Oftentimes, policies promulgated from the national level are inappropriate in the local setting. LGUs can conduct joint ventures with people's organizations (POs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) to engage in the delivery of certain basic services, capability building and livelihood projects, and to develop local enterprises designed to improve productivity and income, diversify agriculture and spur rural industrialization, as provided under the Local Government Code. Also, the LGUs are equipped with sufficient mandate to cover such concerns as peace and order, education, taxation, health and social security, which can be made possible through a more responsive leadership. Moreover, mutuality is best observed between LGUs and their constituents, the latter's votes as gauge of a local government's responsiveness to address community needs.

## Conclusion

The interviews conducted show a sense of hope among the subject vendors. For years they survived on their meager income, yet they were able to send some of their children to school and earned for themselves a sense of security for the future. Despite the many difficulties that confront those in the informal sector, what matters sometimes is how they faced the odds in their lives. These vendors persisted in life and have seen the fruits of their labor. With strong faith in God, coupled with perseverance and sustained assistance from various sectors of society, the hope they peddle is already assured in their hearts and minds.

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