

OF CROSS AND CIRCLES: A CATHOLIC READING OF FH BATACAN'S *SMALLER AND SMALLER CIRCLES* (2015)¹

Isaiah F. Garcia

ABSTRACT

This essay examines FH Batacan's opus, the crime and detective novel *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, from the perspective of Catholic literary criticism. Using the ideas from the critical works of Joshua Hren and Dana Gioia, among others, the reading presents an incarnational and sacramental critique of the novel that foregrounds the timeless and timely themes of redemption, grace, and conversion. Ultimately, the analysis sees itself as a modest contribution to the conversation and dialogue in the (re)emergent field of literature and religion in the Philippine context.

KEYWORDS: *Catholic Imagination, Catholic literary criticism, Smaller and Smaller Circles, Redemption in Philippine fiction*

The great influence of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines is undeniable. Traces of Catholic belief can be seen in our holidays, street names, educational institutions, and even in the names people give to their children. In recent times, with the debates on the Divorce Bill firing up discussions on the separation of Church and State, it is the Catholic Bishops' Conference of

¹ This essay is a revised version of a part of my unpublished MA Literature thesis titled "Sensing the Sacred: The Catholic Imagination and Post-Conciliar Tradition in F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*" defended in May 2019 at the UST Graduate School.

the Philippines (CBCP) which seems to be leading the charge for the bill's defeat, citing divine law as reason. Prior to this, the Catholic Church issued a strong condemnation of extra-judicial killings (EJKs), allying itself with other sectors in society, to stand for human dignity.

The impact of the Catholic Church on Philippine society, history, ethics, and politics is immensely palpable and documented. However, in the field of literature, while there are numerous writers who were products of Catholic schools, there are but few studies exploring the possibility of a Philippine Catholic literary tradition.

This essay seeks to contribute to the studies on the presence of a Philippine Catholic literary tradition, by examining how certain formal elements and thematic engagements of the novel *Smaller and Smaller Circles* (SaSC) carry concepts of what Dana Gioia and Joshua Hren call the Catholic Imagination. To support this thesis, the essay will cover (1) the seminal ideas of Catholic literary criticism, particularly the Catholic Imagination, as proposed by Dana Gioia and Joshua Hren, (2) a Catholic reading of SaSC with particular emphasis on the concepts of incarnationism, sacramentality, and redemption, and (3) a note on how the said text is an example of Catholic literature.

On FH Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*

Smaller and Smaller Circles (SaSC) is a novel by Filipino writer F.H Batacan. Considered to be the first Filipino crime novel in English, SaSC received numerous recognitions from ordinary readers and literary critics alike, including the prestigious National Book Award in 2003, and the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Award in 1999 (Soho Press). The 2015 edition of the novel published by Soho Press is the one analyzed in this essay, as this is the most recent version. SaSC has been adapted into a movie by TBA studios, and is available for streaming in YouTube for free.

The novel SaSC opens with the discovery of the mutilated body of a boy in the Payatas dumpsite. This gruesome murder has caught the attention of National Bureau of Investigations (NBI) Director Francisco Lastimosa, who in turn enlists the help of Jesuit priests Fr. Gus Saenz and Fr. Jerome Lucero. The priests uncover that this is the work of a serial killer.

Upon closer investigation, the priests are able to identify the serial killer as the dentist Alex Carlos, and they further discover that Alex has been abused as a child and is vicariously enacting revenge by killing children. Towards the end of the novel, Fr. Gus attempts to save Alex by convincing him to surrender to the police. A police force officer accidentally opens fire, and Alex retaliates by attacking Fr. Gus. Fr. Gus survives the attack, while Alex dies in the confrontation. The story closes with Fr. Lucero blessing Alex's grave and praying for him.

Reading through Catholic Lenses: The Catholic Imagination

A religious reading of literary texts is as valid and as important as interpreting works in the light of conventional and mainstream theories anchored in issues of race, class, gender, and identity. Mark Knight, in the introductory chapter of his work *An Introduction to Literature and Religion*, argues that:

[turning] to religion as a lens for reading literary texts involves more than identifying religious tropes or biblical sources in literary texts, valuable through this sort of detective work can be. Religion may manifest and construct itself through literary traces, but restricting the study of religion and literature in this way is as limiting as presuming that feminist literary criticism involves nothing more than the search for noteworthy representations of women in literature.

To interpret literary texts from a religious perspective is to draw upon a host of theological ideas and to allow these to shape the way one thinks about the worlds that are imagined through literature. Religious thought brings with it certain ways of apprehending the whole of reality, and although the impact of reflecting on the world in the light of God is almost impossible to isolate fully, it influences both what we look for in literary texts and how we think about what we find there. A religious reading of a text is congruent at some level with virtually every branch of literary criticism, and it does not have to restrict itself to subject matter typically seen as sacred; nor does a religious reading of a text have to emphasize the realm of morality as so many people seem to presume. (2009: 2-3)

Based on this premise, one can be justified in appropriating ideas from the treasury of religious culture and tradition, and applying them to the (re)reading of texts. Roman Catholicism is one such religious culture. Numerous scholars, such as James Matthew Wilson, Joshua Hren, Nicholas Ripatrazone, Jessica Hooten-Wilson, among many others, all presently writing and active in the current literary scene, are pushing for a Catholic interpretation of literary texts, traditions, and theories. Central to Catholic literary criticism is the concept of the Catholic Imagination. While this critical term has undergone numerous developments (Lynch 1960; Greeley, 2000), this essay will appropriate the ideas of Dana Gioia and Joshua Hren, as these are more recent and have built upon the theoretical foundations that have previously been established.

In his essay, "The Catholic Writer Today," Gioia laments the lack of active Catholic writers in modern day America, which he believes to be a bleak contrast to the earlier generations that have produced great American

and Catholic writers like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Reflecting on the nuances and contours of the Catholic literary tradition, Gioia magisterially describes the Catholic understanding of literature:

There is no singular and uniform Catholic worldview, but nevertheless, it is possible to describe some general characteristics that encompass both the faithful and the renegade among the literati. Catholic writers tend to see humanity struggling in a fallen world. They combine a longing for grace and redemption with a deep sense of human imperfection and sin. Evil exists, but the physical world is not evil. Nature is sacramental, shimmering with signs of sacred things. Indeed, all reality is mysteriously charged with the invisible presence of God. Catholics perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ's passion and death. Catholics also generally take the long view of things—looking back to the time of Christ and the Caesars while also gazing forward toward eternity. (2019: 19-20)

The Catholic worldview, or the Catholic imagination, is deeply grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the concepts of Sacramentality, and Redemption. The Incarnation, the belief that Christ who is true God became true Man, foregrounds the radical nature of love – that humanity and the world, as fallen as they are, are worth saving (CCC, 456- 460). Sacramentality is the principle which states that matter, objects, actions, and images can transmit God's grace. Lastly, Redemption is the belief that one can be saved and elevated to a higher dignity and glory (CCC, 517).

Gioia's conception of the Catholic Imagination finds resonance in Joshua Hren's notion of the Christic Imagination. In the introduction to his

first book on Catholic literary criticism, Hren argues that the imagination grounded in the Catholic view seeks to dramatize how human nature is oriented toward redemption and salvation (2021: 1-3). While Gioia, who served as a mentor and friend to Hren, discourses on the Catholic imagination in broad strokes, Hren delves into the particularities and nuances of fiction. It is in this manner that this essay seeks to read *Smaller and Smaller Circles*. By foregrounding the incarnational, sacramental, and redemptive aspects of the story as reflected in the characters, images, and incidents of the novel, this essay hopes to render a Catholic reading of the country's first modern detective novel.

Incarnational Characters: Priest-Detectives and Redemptive Suffering

The doctrine of Incarnation teaches how God, in His love for sinful humanity, has willfully assumed human flesh “to dwell among us” and to die for our redemption. (CCC, 483, 517). Being fully human, Christ has taken on the entirety of human experience, including suffering. Numerous theologians and saints have connected the incarnation not only as an act of love and divine condescension, but also as an act of sacrificial suffering. Hence, the incarnation cannot be fully appreciated outside the context of suffering and sacrifice. While most religions view suffering as inherently evil, Catholics look at suffering as a means of being sanctified. Gioia sees this as a mark of the Catholic imagination: “Catholics perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ’s passion and death” (2019:20).

SaSC has numerous characters who demonstrate this principle, but it is in the priest-detectives, Fr. Gus Saenz and Fr. Jerome Lucero, that we can see incarnationalism in full display, as both characters are not only *de facto* detectives and police consultants, but also men of the cloth and cross.

True to being *in persona Christi*, Fr. Gus Saenz is a priest grounded in charity, truth, and justice. As a forensic anthropologist, he has lent his expertise to the police in identifying Martial Law victims before taking on the Payatas killings case, and as a Jesuit priest, he is seen as an eminent pastor looking after his flock. He braves the Church hierarchy when he comes across the case of a priest who has sexually abused his flock:

But Ramirez [the abusive priest] had powerful friends within the Church hierarchy and in society, and Saenz was shut out of the ensuing Church investigation. One by one, the children and teenagers who had been willing to testify dropped out, fearful and intimidated. Saenz himself had by now earned a reputation for being a bit of a troublemaker, and Sister Miriam was mysteriously reassigned to distant Cotabato City (2015:30).

Despite being frustrated in his just crusade, Fr. Saenz finds himself involved in another case, the case of the Payatas killings. Director Lastimosa of the NBI approaches the distressed priest to seek his aid, and true to his vocation, Fr. Saenz gives his *fiat*:

While you await God's time for the monsignor, Father, I ask you to devote some of your time and your considerable intellect to a problem that I have brought to you." When he smiles, it is a sad and weary smile. "I believe, in light of your recent disappointment, you will find this a suitable undertaking."

"I'm listening." (2015: 34)

In the lines above, one sees the redemptive power of suffering, how the pain that could have demotivated Fr. Saenz has become instead his fuel in assisting the solving of the murders. In another passage, the 'scars' of Fr. Saenz's past—his sufferings—enable him not only to become a better priest but also a better person:

He wonders if he knows enough to recognize the scars when he sees them, just beneath the skin of some, deceptively normal man. He flexes his foot again, and the scar reappears. It is a while before he closes his eyes, and when he does, there is one question in his mind.

In what kind of light will I see your scars? (2015: 136)

The 'passion' of Fr. Saenz can only be matched by his assistant and friend, Fr. Jerome Lucero. A psychiatrist and profiler by profession and a Jesuit priest by vocation, Fr. Lucero finds himself drawn to the case on a personal level. His mentor narrates how his assistant came from a sad background:

Jerome was one of the quietest boys in Saenz's class. And yet, as his tests and papers would eventually show, he was also one of the brightest ... He did not have many friends; his parents hardly ever turned up at parent-teacher conferences. Moving about on campus, he tended to keep his head down, avoiding eye contact. He walked with a limp; some days it would be more manifest, and the boy would be, by turns, listless, distracted or easily startled. Saenz knew almost immediately that he came from a troubled home, that he bore the brunt of the trouble in it, and that the limp was not from any congenital condition but had been acquired. (2015: 67)

Motivated by his love for justice and truth, Fr. Lucero assists Fr. Saenz willingly, and is a catalyst for drawing out the human side of Alex, the serial killer. His incarnational position as a priest draws Alex's parents to open to him. Alex's mother reveals how her son has been abused and how they have been forced to keep silent about it. Seeing that Alex is a victim in his own way, Fr. Lucero makes immediate parallels with his own suffering, recalling how he had been belittled in his youth:

A medic. The dead end of CAT. They wouldn't have let you march for fear of heat exhaustion. They wouldn't have given you shiny spangles on your uniform; they wouldn't have drilled you for Parade and Review. The most they would have let you do was to hand out water and ammonia-laced cotton balls. (2015: 275)

True to the principle of Incarnationalism and its subset of redemptive suffering, we see the characters of Fr. Lucero and Fr. Saenz as priests motivated by their vocation to be Christ-like. They choose to pursue justice not only to save the innocent, but also to redeem the guilty.

Sacramentality: Ordinary Matter as Grace/Engraced

The word sacrament usually invokes memories of First Communions and Confirmations: children dressed in white, kneeling, standing, and genuflecting as they participate in the liturgy that seems to be too mystical and too commonplace at the same time. While this is true, these rituals coincide with deeper and even greater truths and realities (CCC, 1117-1118). In the Mass, the bread and wine cease to be ordinary bread and wine as they are transformed *substantially* and *truly* into the Body and Blood of Christ (CCC, 1376). The prayers of the priest, whether in Latin or the common

tongue, effect what it asks for despite what is felt by the people. To grasp the sacramental is to accept that the tangible and material coexist with the divine and transcendental. Grace, which theologically means God's gift, is the effect of all sacramental signs (CCC, 1129, 1996-1997)

In the context of this essay, sacramentality refer to objects, opportunities, or actions that are occasions of grace, and at the same time, function as *signs* that point to greater graces. Hren demonstrates the interplay of sacramentality and the Catholic imagination:

Say we inhabit a mundane living room scene, in a secular age—in the Midwest, no less. Say that in this miniscule room, a couple is quarreling. Even here, however subtly, the Catholic imagination senses and suggests a vast and eternal stage that extends far beyond the seen scene: like the protagonist of Goethe's *Faust*, this couple tips the eternal scales, albeit by sometimes miniscule degrees. Their talk may be hot with petty frustrations over a grocery bill or cooled by a crippling disagreement, but never absent is the debt of love (Rom 13:18) both will—finally—fulfill or fail to pay. (2021: 1)

Taken together, incarnationism and sacramentality are the cornerstones of Catholic literature. According to Hren: "literature infused with a Catholic vision contains distinct characteristics such as the dramatization of (at least some) suffering as redemptive and the conscious articulation of the natural world's sacramental character." (2021: 6)

The first sacramental sign that can be gleaned from the novel is the mutilated body of the victims. Scripture and tradition are replete with references to the human body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" and as made in the *imago Dei*. Scholars of Catholic literature have realized the potency

of the body as a symbol (Waldmeir 2009: 6-7) and as a site of symbolic interpretations. In the novel, the remains of the victims have the same mutilations: genitals removed, face flayed, and heart taken out (2015: 14-16). Because of these conditions, the priest-detectives immediately note the psychological dimension of the crime (2015: 17), immediately signaling the two clerics into thinking that the criminal is also in need of help (2015: 336-337). The violence and brutality that have been impressed on the bodies can be interpreted as a projection, or perhaps more appropriately, a sacramental analogy, to what the killer wants to do to himself. The almost ritualistic and liturgical action of the murders are also noted by the priest-detectives:

... Maybe it's some kind of inaugural ritual. You know. Something to start the month off right... Maybe he needs to get it done so he can—well maintain normalcy for the rest of the month (2015: 209).

The brutalized condition of the remains, and indeed the remains themselves, as well as the time in which the killings have happened, all function as a sacramental that points to three things about Alex the killer: his deteriorating mental state, his abused childhood, and his wounded and corrupted soul.

Another instance of sacramentality would be the clue Alex sent to the priests to test their abilities. Alex sends a sealed envelope with the surgical knife he had used to kill his victims. This can be seen not only as a form of mockery against the ability of the priests, but also as a sacramental sign that Alex wants to be found. Like the remains of the victims, the sealed envelope shows the killer's guilt, madness, and penitential hunger. This is explored and affirmed toward the end of the novel, when Fr. Jerome notes how Alex would want to be killed by people in "authority," since he had been

abused by someone with authority over him, his PE teacher, Mr. Gorospe (2015: 303).

Lastly, scattered throughout the novel are images associated with the Catholic faith. Functioning as signs pointing to the supernatural, some of the characters are found to have made “pious invocations,” especially in moments of extreme stress and despair. Notable is Alex’s invocation of the Virgin and of Christ the Lord when he felt the pressure of being caught (2015: 225). Moreover, the images and leitmotif of being watched may be interpreted as an allusion, not only to God’s omnipresence and omnipotence, but also as a reference to Cain’s story: his futile attempt to hide from God after killing his brother (2015: 234, 255, 305). In one instance, Fr. Saenz makes an invocation, quoting the Latin prayer taken from the *Psalms*, signifying both his pain at seeing another victim of Alex and for Alex’s impending doom (2015: 265).

These invocations and motifs, while seemingly minute details and accidents in the narrative, can be read as moments where the supernatural and divine lurk behind the scenes.

Closing the Circle: Conversion and Redemption

Conversion is an important cornerstone of the Catholic literary tradition. Hren boldly declares the centrality of redemption in all great Catholic literature:

It seems that the imagination, when it obtains the depths of Catholicity, seeks to save. If we translate this into fiction, the Christic imagination incarnates human nature as having its final end not in the characters’ self-actualization but in salvation (2021: 1).

Gioia affirms this when he notes how the sinner's journey to redemption is basically the point of all great Catholic literature (2019: 22). As mentioned earlier, what motivates Fr. Saenz and Fr. Lucero is not only a sense of justice, but also a pastoral concern for the soul of the killer, who like everyone else, deserves a shot at salvation.

Throughout the investigation, Fr. Lucero notes how the serial killings are made by a man with intense psychological trauma. In his dialogue with the parents, most appropriately inside the Church of St Francis of Assisi, patron of the poor, Fr. Jerome confirms how Alex had been a victim of a covered-up sexual abuse. What has made things worse is how the parents had turned a blind eye towards the issue because of poverty. This prompts him to extend mercy to Alex who has tried to call them anonymously:

"You wouldn't be calling us if you didn't want to tell us something," Jerome says gently. "Your parents want nothing more than to have you back safely with them. Let us help you." (2015: 304)

Fr. Saenz, in the climax of the novel, confronts Alex, not in the usual way a person of the law accosts a criminal, but in a manner befitting a priest, a shepherd reaching out to a lost sheep:

"You can't bring them back, Alex; you and I know that. But you can heal yourself. Just a little bit, every day. You can regain what he took from you. You can atone for what you took from others." (2015: 335)

As horrible as Alex's crimes are, the reader can see how these do not diminish, and even heighten, how the killer in him is in dire need of help.

Trapped in a closing circle of paranoia and desolation that have been brought about by his actions, the novel highlights Alex's fear, and simultaneously, his desire, to get caught. As mentioned before, this may be read as a subtle intertextual allusion to Cain's attempt to hide from God's presence in the Garden of Eden. Considering Hren's remark how the 'final end' should be salvation and not the character's self-actualization, one can note how the moments of fear and paranoia are in themselves an act of grace as they will end the suffering he is in:

I can hear their thoughts. The priest knows. He's coming for me. Let him come, then. Let him come soon. And then all this will be over. (2015: 253)

Still in consonance with Hren's position on salvation, the final confrontation scene can be read as a form of confession and spiritual counseling and direction. Standing in as a priest, Fr. Gus intends to inspire contrition and reminds Alex of his humanity:

"Come on, Alex. Can't you see? You've become a little bit like him already. Is that what you wanted?" Saenz waits for a response; when it doesn't come, he continues. "I don't think so. I think the last thing you want is to be anything like him."

"I'm nothing like him," Alex says savagely from behind the curtain.

"I know you're not. So please. Come out with me now. Let us try to help. You can put him behind you, and this will all stop." (2015: 335)

One can also interpret this moment, as an extended allusion to biblical tales of redemption, of a God *dives misericordia*, extending his arm to save, not to condemn. Alex consents to the offer, yet a police officer mistakenly shoots him. Enraged, he attacks the good priest thinking he has been betrayed again. The police rains bullets down on Alex in retaliation for almost killing Fr. Saenz. Fatally wounded, the priest still wants to save the victim-killer but falls unconscious. Dying, Alex remarked:

Give me the peace I deserve. It's so cold. I'm really sleepy all of a sudden. The pain should keep me awake, but I guess not not this time mama papa so sorry so sleepy so quiet it's about time (2015: 339)

From these lines, the careful reader can see a glimpse of hope that Alex may have found the peace and redemption he has so desired, needed, and deserved. Fr. Lucero, a witness to Fr. Gus and Alex's encounter, shares his reflection on the incident of that fateful night:

The younger priest is frowning now. "He smiled, Gus. Smiled before he died. Of course, you didn't see it; you were very close to dying yourself. Clear eyes looking past us to heaven and a smile like it was quiet in there at last." (2015: 351)

Affirming Alex's redemption, the chapter and case close with Fr. Lucero blessing his grave.

Smaller and Smaller Circles as Catholic Literature

Given the presence of the elements of the Catholic imagination, it is evident that Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles* is not only a novel

belonging to the Crime and Detective Fiction genre, but it is also an opus that may be classified as a Catholic novel, and a good Catholic novel at that. The characters and thematic engagements of the novel are equally about social justice as they are about the salvation of one's soul. The novel falls under Mary Reichardt's definition of Catholic literature. In the introduction to her work *Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature* published in 2010, Reichardt defines Catholic literature as:

...that which employs the history, traditions, culture, theology, and/or spirituality of Catholicism in a substantial and informed manner. Whether it involves Catholic subject matter or not, and whether its author is a Catholic or not, such literature is substantially grounded in a deep and realistic understanding of at least some aspects of the Catholic faith, Catholic life, or the Catholic tradition (3)

One may ask, can this novel be really a part of Catholic literature, considering its portrayal of violence, clerical corruption, and even sexual abuse? Gioia seems to provide an answer for this:

The Catholic worldview does not require a sacred subject to express its sense of divine immanence. The greatest misunderstanding of Catholic literature is to classify it solely by its subject matter. ... Catholic literature is rarely pious. In ways that sometimes trouble or puzzle both Protestant and secular readers, Catholic writing tends to be comic, rowdy, rude, and even violent. Catholics generally prefer to write about sinners rather than saints. (It is not only that sinners generally make more interesting protagonists. Their failings also more vividly demonstrate humanity's fallen state). (20)

The confluence of the sacred and the profane cements the Catholicity in Batacan's novel. One can argue, with good reason, that the action of grace and redemption would not be as pronounced without the evil that the characters had to face.

Conclusion

The present study argues that the novel *Smaller and Smaller Circles* is a work of the Catholic imagination and can be read as an example of Catholic literature. By looking at the principles of Catholic Imagination as found in the works of Gioia and Hren, the essay foregrounds the presence of the incarnationism, sacramentality, and redemption in the said text. The said presence of these elements logically positions the work as an example of a Catholic novel, more importantly, a *Filipino* Catholic novel. While the Philippines has no lack in good literature and erudite critical scholarship, it is hoped that future researchers would investigate the possibility of a Catholic reading in works by local writers.

References:

- Batacan, F.H. *Smaller and Smaller Circles*. New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2015.
- Gioia, Dana. *The Catholic Writer Today and Other Essays*. Wiseblood Books, 2019.
- Greeley, Andrew M. *The Catholic Imagination*. University of California Press, 2000.
- Hren, Joshua. *How to read (and write) like a Catholic*. TAN Books. 2021.
- Knight, Mark. *An Introduction to Religion and Literature*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

Lynch, William F., SJ. *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*. Edited by Glenn C. Arbery, Wiseblood Books, 2019.

Reichardt, Mary, editor. *Between Human and the Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2010.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Word and Life Publications. 1997.

“*The Story Behind: F.H. Batacan’s Smaller and Smaller Circles - Soho Press.*” Soho Press, 21 Apr. 2015, sohopress.com/the-story-behind-f-h-batacans-smaller-and-smaller-circles.

Waldmeir, John Christian. *Cathedrals of Bone: The Role of the Body in Contemporary Catholic Literature*. Fordham University Press, 2009.