

Katharine L. Wiegeler. *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines*, Theology and Religious Studies Series (Quezon City, Phils.: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007 & Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), xii pp. + 207 pp., paperback, ISBN: 978-971-550-515-4, US\$ 23.00.

The religious dynamics of the common lives of Filipino adherents of Mike Velarde's El Shaddai is fascinating indeed. It is good news that Katharine L. Wiegeler's book entitled *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* is included in the Theology and Religious Studies, a series edited by Agnes M. Brazal and published by Ateneo de Manila University Press. The written work comes from an ethnographer who, although an outsider from El Shaddai community, is yet sympathetic enough to paint a picture of this folk Roman Catholic group as a prosperity gospel type of a Charismatic renewal movement. The author wasted no page. Positive or negative results of her study are nicely articulated in her writing. Her use of fictional places and characters are meant to protect people and not to deliberately misrepresent the reality. (See ix-xi where the author acknowledged that "Bandong-Sinag" is a fictional name, yet is a real location in the heart of Manila. Also see the many El Shaddai devotees whom she fictionally named and many more whom she did not name in her book.) Wiegeler is conscientious. She does not want to hurt people. No exploitation is done.

It is a valuable book that has many advantages to read. It is written by an anthropologist from an outsider's perspective. It is also studied from the dimension of how the adherents of Velarde see themselves. Further, it is an in-depth consideration of the faith of those who believe that is properly documented. The volume is not another anecdotal evaluation of El Shaddai. The author tries to appreciate the vibrancy and development of Velarde's faithful and its effect on Roman Catholicism in the Philippines. A group that the author described as taking "its name from a booklet written by Rev. Kenneth E. Hagin, a popular American preacher of the prosperity gospel," became a powerful political block. (4) It is an empirical research done with the primary sources themselves, the people who call their God as El Shaddai. A work that is well researched and appropriated within the environment of Filipino spirituality is the precise worth of this volume.

Narrative is the form that Wiegeler utilized in reporting the result of her research. She used word-for-word testimonies of people that she

interviewed as well as her own summary and understanding of what El Shaddai adherents think. She also quotes statements of Mike Velarde in both verbatim and digest forms. The interviews that she did with ordinary members of El Shaddai, the leaders of the group, the sympathetic priests to the movement and their leader, Velarde himself are authentically presented. Together with the bibliographical literature that she consulted she weaves the result of her ethnographical research into a coherent whole. She is able to portray the story of El Shaddai not from the perspective their founder and topmost preacher but from the eyes of those who make this religious group thrive. In other words, the book is from the perspective of the margins. Wiegle outlines the book chapters in the following order: 1. "Seeking El Shaddai" (1-15); 2. "Golden Rules, Miracle Investments, and the Seed-Faith Principle" (16-40); 3. "Mass Media and Religious Experience" (41-58); 4. "Urban Spaces of Community and Congregation" (59-79); 5. "Stories of Transformation and Desire" (80-104); 6. "Local Religious Life" (115-141); 7. "Spiritual Warfare in Sinag and Bandong" (142-169); and "Epilogue" (170-173). The chapters are well arranged thematically. The arrangement of themes is ordered progressively which is leading to the notion that Bro. Mike Velarde's El Shaddai is effective for Filipino poor because they receive hope as "the self-identified rich" in their attitude which brings "expect[ed] miracles". And because they are 'rich in the spirit,' they indeed *see* miracles happen." (173)

*Investing in Miracles* is fun to read. It has so many interesting stories. As a Filipino who is reviewing this book, my heart is touched, I can hear the heartbeat of the characters in the narratives related by the author. I read with sympathy. I appreciate the accuracy of the reports given by the chapters. I have a glimpse of Filipino folk Christianity as the common people do it. Wiegele is very careful not to say any side comments that are degrading to the personalities she introduced in her volume. She is astute in doing comparison and contrast of beliefs using her characters. She is also very judicious in the way she included the materials she gathered in painting a picture of Velarde. The author simply paints Velarde according to the manner the people whom she interviewed and interacted with see the leader of El Shaddai. Even the pictures that are printed on pages 105-114 speak for themselves. The picture in figure 9 where there is a boy roller blading is facing another boy without shoes and wearing clothing with holes gives a clear portrait of Wiegele's context of research. (see 109, lower picture)

What is of interest to the non-Catholic classical Pentecostal review is that several times in this volume El Shaddai enthusiasts

testify, although they started with Eddie Villanueva's JIL (Jesus Is Lord) fellowship, they left this "Protestant" group and joined Velarde's "Catholic" organization. One reason is an experience of physical healing done by an El Shaddai affiliate. (132) Another cause is that Velarde's group provides a token of protection such as a handkerchief with "printed Psalm 91, 'God Our Protector' [which] El Shaddai members believe they are protected from all dangers when carrying the handkerchief." (149) These phenomenal incidents bring the question of the manifestations of the Spirit within the Protestant JIL and the Catholic El Shaddai. It is not a question of who has the better or superior theological understanding of pneumatology, rather it is a matter of acknowledging that the Spirit moves wherever He is pleased to move.

The El Shaddai members, poor as they are, believe that in all of the events in their lives God is in control. They have a thankful and grateful hearts in everything. They are putting God first. Wiegele describes the attitude of her El Shaddai friends about "God' plan" on their lives. And it is noteworthy to cite the author in her own words:

That my research is somehow part of God's plan, that my report will be important for the world to hear, that my presence is mandated by God, that by talking to me they are bearing witness to their transformation with God—are all common themes during my interviews. It is not just an interview, it is "the Lord's work." As they tell of their spiritual transformations, they are performing one of their duties to God: "sharing," witnessing before others. Even more important, I can tell their stories of transformation to the world at large. (156)

In other words, the religious sincerity as well as their "evangelical theology" of witnessing to others about what God has done is sound classical Pentecostal theology. They may not have a clear understanding of orthodox evangelistic theology but they have truthful orthopraxis attitude. This evaluation of the review should be put in the wider context of Filipino Christian spirituality within the Roman Catholic tradition.

*Investing in Miracles* is a highly recommendable book to read for every Filipino minister of the Gospel. It provides a very perceptive description of the Filipino attitude about spiritual things. Protestant pastors, Catholic priests and academic researchers will get much benefit from this book. The challenge that the book brought out to the

better understanding of Christianity in the Philippines is to make the message of the gospel and the idea of God, Christ and the Spirit palatable to the masses who would rather have a Divine Being who is immanent in their day to day life than theological transcendence portrayed in the sermons that they hear from the clergy. Wiegele is successful in painting the weird doctrines and practices of El Shaddai top man, his leaders and the Filipino masses holding on to the group within the framework of folk Catholicism. She is also to be appreciated in judiciously concluding Velarde's preaching emphasis as prosperity gospel theology that gained sensation among the poorest of the poor among the Filipinos in Metro Manila. (173) The El Shaddai ethnography of Wiegele is an invaluable contribution to a better understanding of Filipino Roman Catholicism and Pentecostal-Charismatic theological discourse as well as a perceptive analogy of world Christianity as seen from the margins of the third-world religious spirituality. Even the non-Filipino would gain much benefit by reading *Investing in Miracles*.

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