

José M. de Mesa: Filipino Theologian

Stephen Bennett BEVANS

Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, USA

Abstract

José M. de Mesa was a true and proud Filipino and a brilliant and creative theologian. This article focuses first on how de Mesa claimed his Filipino identity as he engaged in doing theology in Filipino context. Then several themes anchored in Filipino language and culture are explored. A conclusion reflects on the friendship that the author enjoyed with this eminent Filipino theologian.

Keywords

José M. de Mesa, contextual theology, Filipino theology, *Pagdama*, *Kagandahang-Loob*, *Ginhawa*

In May 2024 a group of us gathered in Manila to remember and celebrate the life of a truly great man, a pioneer in Asian and contextual theology, José M. de Mesa. Joe, who died on April 15, 2021, was a true Filipino and a brilliant and creative theologian. He was also a great personal friend, and I was truly honored to have been asked to deliver the keynote address at the small conference in his memory and honor.

I thought it would be appropriate to share my reflections with you—Asian theological educators and theologians—in this conference on contextual theology. In a way, I am employing what I call the “transcendental model” in my book on contextual theology. I focus on one person doing theology in a particular context, but I hope that his theology, a product of authentic cultural identity and authentic Christian faith, will serve as a model or template for all who are committed to teaching and doing theology contextually.¹

1 See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 103–16.

Corresponding author

Stephen Bennett BEVANS: sbevans@ctu.edu

For about three months I immersed myself in Joe de Mesa's writings. As I read through many of his works, I marveled at his love of his country and culture and was amazed and dazzled by his theological breadth, depth, and creativity. His writings once more revealed to me his *kagandahang loob*, his beautiful inner self expressed in that rich Tagalog term that Joe so loved. I hope and pray that this tribute will do some small justice to Joe's life—so well lived, and so soon taken from us—and will help and inspire all who do contextual theology in the Asian context.

As my title indicates, my reflections will have two parts, although they are interconnected and can only be distinguished, not separated. My first part will reflect on Joe's identity as a Filipino, the context in which he lived out his Christian faith and imagined and constructed his theology. Then, in a second part, I will try to bring together several key themes of his theology. A short conclusion will be a personal testimony to Joe's and my friendship. In my presentation I will quote Joe liberally, so that we can hear his voice as clearly as possible as we celebrate, remember, and cherish his life.

JOSÉ DE MESA AS FILIPINO

A Love of Filipino Culture

Joe loved Filipino culture. He loved being a Filipino. Joe lived out and understood his deep Christian faith in terms of his Filipino identity. Culture, he believed, is holy, and “cultural identity and integrity is a soteriological issue.”² When he discovered that God's nature as love was best expressed in terms of Philippine culture and language as *kagandahang-loob* (the beautiful inner self) rather than mere *pagibig* (the ordinary Tagalog word for love), “I ‘felt,’” he wrote, “the goodness of the Good News and was drawn by its beauty. I was no longer just intellectually fascinated by it. I was personally touched by such an inculturated interpretation of revelation-faith, touched by God in and through my very own culture. I was grateful to God for the gift of a beautiful culture which made me proud of belonging to it. Experiencing ‘the Holy’ in and through the ‘burning bush’ of the culture

2 José M. de Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” in José M. de Mesa, *José M. de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2016), 60.

brought me to a deeper appreciation of both the Gospel and of my culture.”³

Joe’s works are filled with references to popular religiosity or popular Catholicism in Philippine culture. He speaks fondly of the rituals of going to the cemetery on the feast of *Todos los Santos* (All Saints Day), pilgrimages to Mount Banahaw south of Manila, participating in the rituals and processions of Holy Week, celebrating *Simbang Gabi* (Masses on each of the nine days before Christmas) and sharing the *Noche Buena* meal together as a family after Christmas midnight Mass. He writes of the rich theology of the *Mahal na Pasyon* (Jesus’s passion sung in Tagalog), and the consolation of kissing, touching, and wiping a statue such as the *Santo Niño* of Cebu or the Black Nazarene of Quiapo in Manila. These practices and many more made up the “body language” and *pagpapadama*, the *feeling*, of Joe’s faith. These important practices and rituals, Joe recognized, are what made him fully human, fully Christian, and fully Filipino.⁴ I know such practices are quite foreign to many readers, and might even be looked upon with suspicion, but Pope Francis spoke of them as true sources for contextual theology.⁵ Catholicism, notes Catholic theologian Thomas F. O’Meara, is an intense form of faith in the incarnation.⁶

A Love of Filipino Language

Joe’s love of his culture goes hand in hand with his love for his native language, Tagalog. Indeed, he writes, a vernacular language is the “voice of culture.”⁷ He offers three “interrelated tasks” for inculturation: a

3 José M. de Mesa and David Jonathan Y. Bayot, “Introduction,” in *A Theological Reader*, 8.

4 See, for example, de Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology,” 76–77; “Inculturation as Pilgrimage,” 5–7; José M. de Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity in Popular Catholicism,” 507; Dennis T. González, ed., and Yvonne F. de Mesa, trans., *José de Mesa’s Novena De Gallo: Paghahanda sa Araw ng Pasko sa Tahanan* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2022).

5 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 126.

6 Thomas F. O’Meara, “The Future of Catholicism,” Inaugural Lecture as William K. Warren Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame (October 15, 1986), 3.

7 José M. de Mesa, “Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology,” in *A Theological Reader*, 121, 137, 158.

recognition that any culture is relative to its particular time and context, that culture is to be “destigmatized and revalued,” and that “the Faith must be interpreted with indigenous categories.” To this third task he adds: “I insist on using the vernacular because it somehow ensures, no matter how another foreign language renders it, that substantially the cultural meaning is maintained. *Traduttore, tradittore*. The vernacular of a culture is the most distinctive feature of that culture. It is culture speaking in its own voice and expressing thoughts in its own terms.”⁸

Joe explained in an interview with a former student how he proposed in one of his courses to teach only in Tagalog, even though not everyone in the class—composed of those who felt more comfortable in other Philippine languages such as Ilocano or Cebuano—might feel uncomfortable at first. Let’s just experiment, he said, and if the students didn’t fully understand the Tagalog after a month he would explain things in English. “Guess what? We never reverted back to using English. Their evaluation at the end of the term was ‘*mas maliwanag*’ [clearer] and ‘*mas nadama ko ang kurso*’ [I felt the course more].” They not only *understood* better; they *felt* that they understood. Using the Tagalog language spoke more to the students than English ever could have.⁹ “If only we would shift our theological language from English to the vernacular, I’m sure that our process of creating a corpus of Filipino theology would be accelerated.”¹⁰ I know that Joe became more and more convinced of this in his latter years. He knew that he could only really do Filipino theology if he wrote and spoke in his beloved Tagalog. “I feel [note Joe’s verb!] that Filipino has the capability and the capacity to become a theological language side by side with other theological languages. I feel that, in the face of the experience of colonization whereby we internalized the feelings of inferiority, showing the beauty—the wisdom and genius—of our Filipino culture is the way to self-pride and self-confidence.”¹¹

Joe’s written English is elegant. I do not know Tagalog, but I would imagine that his writing in Tagalog is even more elegant and heartfelt. Joe was Filipino to the core.

8 De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” 15.

9 De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” 20.

10 De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” 15–16.

11 De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” 20.

JOSÉ DE MESA AS THEOLOGIAN: CELEBRATING HIS GENIUS

“*Naglalakbay ako*. I am on a pilgrimage. In this intellectual journey I’ve always dreamt of contributing significantly to the creation and development of an authentic Filipino theological tradition, unabashedly utilizing Filipino thought, and increasingly in the Filipino language. I have consciously taken the Filipino as my primary and inner guide to help me better understand ‘the Way of Jesus,’ the religious tradition I cherish.”¹² As a Christian *Filipino*, Joe brought his love of Filipino culture, religiosity, and language to bear on his life as a theologian. Filipino culture was his guide to reappropriating the Christian tradition.

A Knowledge of Tradition

One of the reasons why Joe was such a great theologian was his rich and deep knowledge of the Christian tradition. He clearly understood that the tradition he had grown up with and had learned to master in graduate school was one that was already inculturated in Western culture and in past times. But he knew as well that any real tradition is flexible, always growing, and including new ways of imagining and thinking, and only makes sense in a particular cultural, historical, and social context. This is why he probed the meaning of tradition to discover its transforming meaning in the *culture and language* he loved, so that it might illumine and transform the *people* he loved.

Joe’s knowledge of the tradition is evident in his marvelous essay on the theology of marriage.¹³ This knowledge is evident in his groundbreaking and illuminating reflection in which he proposes that the term *bakas* and its cognates express a more meaningful understanding of “sacrament” than the mere translation of “*sacramentum*” as “*sakramento*.”¹⁴ It is evident in his summary of traditional trinitarian theology in a draft essay that he shared with me in 2013, in which “feeling” (*pagdama*) is evoked to capture the identity and mission of the Holy Spirit, “face” (*mukha*) is employed to speak

12 De Mesa, “Preface,” in *A Theological Reader*, vii.

13 De Mesa, “The *Mysterion* Which is Marriage: A Vision for Marital Life,” in *A Theological Reader*, 215–238.

14 De Mesa, “*Bakas*: Retrieving the Sense of Sacramentality in the Ordinary,” in *A Theological Reader*, 465–502.

meaningfully in the Filipino context of the Word, Jesus, and the deepest, mysterious nature of a person (*loob*) captures in a particularly rich and totally Filipino way the Holy Mystery who is the Father.¹⁵ Joe's knowledge of the tradition could see how the received tradition can be "relativized" in order that the riches of Filipino culture and the Tagalog language could be "destigmatized and revalued."¹⁶

Three Key Theological Terms

Several Tagalog terms are key to expressing how Joe accomplishes this relativization, destigmatization, and revaluing of Filipino culture. They are *pagdama*, *kagandahang-loob*, and *ginhawa*. I have already referred to the first two. A brief reflection on each of these will reveal, I think, Joe's theological genius — because it is true genius. However, I would argue that Joe's theology illuminates the tradition not only for Filipinos. His reflections go beyond his own context to illuminate Christian theology and faith for other cultures as well. I, for one, for example, have been deeply touched by Joe's work, and it has led me into a deeper appreciation of my own faith and helped me articulate my faith better in my theology. Joe spoke about this latter dynamic as "intertraditionality."¹⁷

Pagdama

We alluded to *pagdama* in the previous section of this presentation. Here we offer how Joe reappropriates this central Filipino way of knowing in a way that Filipinizes theology and religious practice and offers a contribution to the broader theological tradition. *Pagdama* means "feeling" in English, but Joe would rather translate it as a "way of experiencing."¹⁸ Joe is convinced that this is the way that Filipinos know the world and know their faith. Rather than having a "worldview," Joe believes, Filipinos have a "world feel." "*Pagdama* is not just emotion; it is affective cognition or cognitive affection with a predilection for the affective." It "integrates

15 José M. de Mesa, "Adequate, But Not Enough: A Filipino Reflection on the Triune God," unpublished manuscript, 2013.

16 De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," 15.

17 De Mesa, "*Bakas*," 493–494; "Feeling as Solidarity," 505–506.

18 De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," 508. Joe also reflects briefly on *pagdama* in his essay "Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology," 80–83.

cognition and feeling, where to really know is to feel and to feel is to truly know.” Joe compares *pagdama* to St. John Henry Newman’s “illative sense.”¹⁹

Pagdama is the soul of Filipino popular religion, a true *locus theologicus* or theological source for Filipinos, to allude once more to the statement by Pope Francis.²⁰ “Prayer in popular Catholicism is uttered by the body in its various movements and gestures. This is most likely the reason why people wipe the statues of Jesus and Mary and other saints with a handkerchief or a small towel and then wipe themselves with it in turn. They want to ‘feel’ God making them experience Godself as they want God ‘to feel’ their faith.”²¹ Such an experiential, heartfelt faith, Joe implies, is how one might present faith in a Filipino context. It is not so much an intellectual believing as an affective trust, an offering of the heart. Faith is not so much believing statements in a catechism as a warm attachment to a person, a movement of the heart, not just of the mind.

Joe suggests that this defining aspect of Filipino knowing, while it offers a crucial perspective on Filipinos’ faith, can also serve as a way of knowing theological and religious truths that can serve the broader church. A classic Western understanding of faith revolves around “orthodoxy,” or “right thinking.” In the 1970s Latin American liberation theologians offered another powerful dynamic to faith knowledge in the form of “orthopraxis,” or “right action.” As one prominent liberation theologian expresses it, “to know the truth is to do the truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus, to know sin is to take away sin, to know suffering is to free the world from suffering, to know God is to go to God in justice.”²² Recognizing the centrality of *pagdama* to Filipino faith knowledge, Joe proposes that a truly Filipino way of believing could be called “orthopathy,” or “right feeling.” If such an understanding “is incorporated into a Filipino tradition of Catholicism, it may pave the way for enhancing our sense of connectedness and solidarity, for heightening our capacity for discernment in complex ethical situations,

19 De Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity,” 508.

20 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 126.

21 De Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity,” 510–511.

22 Jon Sobrino, “El conocimiento teológico en la teología europea y latinoamericana,” in *Liberación y cautiverio: debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina* (Mexico City: Comité Organizador, 1975), 207.

and for deepening our understanding of sacramentality. In addition, such a tradition of the Catholic faith may indicate also a theological reality that has not been considered adequately as of today: the humanizing role of feeling in living and understanding our faith.”²³

I think Joe was right on the money here. Interestingly, in November 2023 Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter entitled *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, which I have translated as “In Order to Move Theology Forward.” Francis called for a new way of doing theology, based on a new way of thinking, more focused on wisdom and spirituality than on logic and reason. He called for a theology that “should *enlarge its boundaries in the direction of wisdom* in order not to be dehumanized and impoverished. Along this path, theology can contribute to the current discussion of “rethinking the nature of thinking,” demonstrating that it is *a true critical way of knowing in that it is sapiential knowing*, not abstract and ideological but spiritual, worked out on one’s knees, grounded in adoration and prayer; it is a transcendent knowledge and, at the same time, attentive to the voice of the people, therefore “popular” theology. . . .”²⁴

I’m sure that Pope Francis would have read Joe’s work with much relish!

Kagandahang-Loob

One of the most beautiful Filipino concepts is that of *loob*, the deepest self, the fullest reality of a person, one’s true character. Joe, like many other Filipino philosophers and theologians, wrote eloquently of *loob*. “*Loob*,” Joe writes, “is the core of one’s personhood and where the true worth of the person lies. It is what makes the person what he/she is and who he/she is as a person. The *loob* is the very zone of creaturehood which is the substratum of ideas, feelings, and behavior. To speak of the *loob*, then, is to speak of the person as a whole.”²⁵

Loob is a relational concept. An evil person is said to be of “*masamang loob*” (literally, a bad inner self), but “a good person is said to be of *magandaang loob* (literally, a beautiful inner self) or alternatively of

23 De Mesa, “Feeling as Solidarity,” 511.

24 Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *motu proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, November 1, 2023, 7. My translation.

25 José M. de Mesa, “Jesus: The Revelation of God’s *Kagandahang Loob*,” in *A Theological Reader*, 302.

“*mabuting loob*” (literally, a good inner self) because he/she generally relates well and positively to others.”²⁶ A truly good person, however, is more than simply “good,” since “there is a kind of goodness . . . which is cold and unattractive. Holy people who have no human warmth, for instance, tend to repel rather than to attract.” *Kagandahang loob* is true goodness. It is *maganda*, beautiful, “goodness which is warm, approachable, and winsome.” Jesus, Joe observes, is called the “beautiful (*kalos* in Greek) shepherd.”²⁷

Joe describes *kagandahang-loob* as having several characteristics. It points to the fact that such a person can only be really known by her or his relationships to others. A person of *kagandahang-loob* acts out of freedom; she or he acts not because she or he has to, but simply out of an inner generosity of spirit. In this way the person of *kagandahang-loob* is totally other-oriented. His or her generosity asks for nothing in return but looks only for the good of others. It is simply overflowing, even excessive. A person is usually perceived as “beautiful” not as a result of a one-off encounter, but over time, as his or her *loob* manifests itself. A person of *Kagandahang-loob* is a person of deep authenticity, of spontaneous kindness.²⁸

Joe describes Jesus as the person *par excellence* of *Kagandahang-loob*. He matches up perfectly with all these characteristics and so reveals to humanity in his own humanity the true nature of God.²⁹ In another essay on Revelation and Faith in Philippine context, Joe expresses it this way: “Perhaps, for Filipinos, *kagandahang-loob* is primarily “pure positivity” (Schillebeeckx) that captivates and wins people over. Surely, this is a reminder for us of someone who ‘went around doing good’ (Acts 10:38). It refers to a goodness that is not cold but warm, a kindness that is not enslaving but liberating.”³⁰

This is who God is. This is what God’s revelation is ultimately about. “Following this cultural manner of thinking,” Joe writes, “revelation

26 De Mesa, “Jesus,” 303.

27 De Mesa, “Jesus,” 303.

28 De Mesa, “Jesus,” 303–307.

29 De Mesa, “Jesus,” 307–314.

30 José M. de Mesa, “Communicating ‘Revelation-Faith’ with Culture in Mind,” in *A Theological Reader*, 324.

as God's action can be articulated as *pagpapadama ng Diyos ng Kanyang kagandahang-loob*: God making us experience His/Her most authentic, winsome, beneficent, relational self." Revelation places us in a relation with God in God's *kagandahang-loob*, and "the experienced effect of this relationship, a communion of the most authentic relational selves of God and people, is *ginhawa*, that is, an overall sense of well-being."³¹

It is to this concept of *ginhawa* that we turn to next.

Ginhawa

In an essay entitled "The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings," Joe proposes that a richer understanding for "salvation" might be better expressed for Filipinos in the word (and its variations) of *ginhawa* rather than in *kaligtasan* (the usual Tagalog term). In developing his argument, Joe begins from the biblical tradition, noting that "the notion of salvation is rooted in *earthly* realities."³² It is a notion that signifies how women and men are freed from individual stress and worry in times of danger, injustice, and sickness, or from community dangers of war, political upheaval, or famine. Gradually, this very concrete idea becomes a metaphor for freedom from spiritual hindrances to full humanity, and a metaphor as well of the full flourishing of all of humanity when the kingdom—or, as I prefer to speak of it, the "kin-dom" of God—finally becomes a reality in history.

Given this biblical background, Joe then investigates the meaning of *ginhawa*. *Ginhawa* has meanings similar to that of the Bible. It is rooted as well in earthly realities. It could mean living a life of ease, free from pain and sickness or difficulty, being consoled in times of grief, and a basic freedom from want. If one thinks of salvation in terms of freedom, safety, and well-being, *ginhawa* has the connotation of being freed from any *hirap*.³³ Ultimately, Joe writes, using the word *ginhawa* is a way of speaking about the total well-being of humanity in the embrace of God. In our own time we can press Joe a bit further to say that it is about the full well-being and flourishing of all of creation, healed from the destruction that humanity in its greed has caused—in the Philippines and all over the world.

31 De Mesa, "Communicating 'Revelation-Faith,'" in *A Theological Reader*, 325.

32 José M. de Mesa, "The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings," in *A Theological Reader*, 332.

33 De Mesa, "The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings," 333–335.

It makes good theological sense then, Joe concludes, that Jesus is the source of *ginhawa*. Jesus embodies, demonstrates, and proclaims this reality in his life and ministry. He brings “salvation to sinners and indeed to all [peoples—and, I would say, to all of creation].”³⁴ “It is only in following Jesus and committing ourselves to Him that real *kaginhawahan* is possible. ‘Come to me, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy, and I will give you relief. Bend your necks to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and your souls will find relief. For my yoke is good to bear, my load is light (Mt. 11:28-30).”³⁵

If I may bring all three key terms together, thinking of salvation as *ginhawa* is a way to help Filipinos *feel* the *kagandahang-loob* of God as offering the full healing, full forgiveness, full flourishing, and full transformation to all women and men, and to all creation. This was accomplished in Jesus’s ministry, suffering, death, and sharing with us his resurrected new life. It is this new life, this *bagong buhay*, that Christians are called to share with the whole world.

Joe has offered much more in the creation of a richly expressed and richly felt Filipino theology. I can only hint at this in what I have said so far. I do hope, however, that my words can give a sense of Joe as a theologian of uncommon ability to capture the spirit of his people, and to illumine the constant presence of God in the culture and language that he so loved. I hope, too, that using the transcendental model of contextual theologizing has sparked feelings of “sympathy” and “antipathy” in you—so that you can do your own theologizing out of your own Asian experience and cultures.³⁶

CONCLUSION

True to his identity as a Filipino, Joe loved people. He was relational to the core. He and I were good friends, enjoying a friendship that dated back to 1988. In the Acknowledgments of *A Theological Reader* Joe mentions me as “a close friend and a stimulating conversation partner in this theological journey.”³⁷ As the Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union, I invited Joe several times to come to

34 De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” 333.

35 De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” 345–346.

36 See Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 106.

37 De Mesa, “Acknowledgments,” in *A Theological Reader*, xi.

CTU to be the “Luzbetak Visiting Professor.” The students raved about Joe—his passion, his creativity, his chalk talk. Many told me that it was the best course they had had at CTU. When he visited, Joe stayed in our SVD community in Chicago, and I look back gratefully and humbly on many wonderful conversations, especially at breakfast and late at night around our kitchen table. I remember Joe’s love of ice cream and his love of making it—sugar free, of course! My favorite flavor was pistachio, and one time he even made it for me when I had dinner at his and Yvonne’s house in Cainta.

Joe inscribed my copy of his 2003 book *Why Theology Is Never Far from Home* with the following words: “I count as a great blessing on my 25th year as a theologian my having been a Luzbetak Visiting Professor at CTU last Spring. Even greater is your friendship that made my stay so much more meaningful. In friendship, Joe.” Ours was a truly wonderful friendship. It’s hard to express what Joe meant to me, how he enriched my life as a theologian, but especially as a person. I will always be grateful for his *kagandahan-loob*, for his love of all things Filipino, for his theological passion and genius, for his sharing his family with me, but especially for his friendship.

Over a hundred years ago, a young Indian cleric named V. S. Azariah ended what became the most famous speech at the 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference with the words: “GIVE US FRIENDS!” Today, the idea of friendship is one of the key ideas in the theology of mission theology. Several of the most interesting books in mission today deal with friendship as the key to what it means to participate in God’s mission in the world. Sam Ewell writes of “overhearing the gospel” as an apprentice member of a samba band when he was a missionary to Brazil. Dana Robert writes of the importance of cross-cultural friendships in mission. Tim Noble employs the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in his book *Mission from the Perspective of the Other*.³⁸

Perhaps the doing of contextual theology today could profit from friendship as well. My sense is that it needs to be rooted in a deep friendship

38 Samuel E. Ewell, *Faith Seeking Conviviality: Reflections on Ivan Illich, Christian Mission, and the Promise of Life Together* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019); Dana L. Robert, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Christian Diversity in Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019); Tim Noble, *Mission from the Perspective of the Other* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

with one's people and with one's culture. It needs to be rooted in a deep friendship with the tradition and with the great women and men who have contributed to it. Contextual theologians need as well to be friends with one another—to share resources, insights, stories, and sources. And contextual theology needs the friendship of theologians in other countries and cultures to engage in a rich intercultural and intertraditional dialogue that will both critique and inspire their work. This is the great advantage of a conference like this, where friendships can flourish. My friendship with Joe de Mesa is an icon of such friendship. Your friendships with one another are icons as well. May these friendships lead you to develop a theology that is deeply rooted in the context of your people and of this world today.

About author

Stephen Bennett BEVANS is a priest in the Roman Catholic missionary congregation of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and Professor of Mission and Culture Emeritus at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, USA.