

# Death and Food Offering: The Ilocano “*Atang*” Ritual from a Contextual Theology

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## **Abstract**

*Atang (food offering) is an indigenous ritual for the dead in the Northern Philippines. The atang ritual is thought to be a part of the cultural and religious contexts of the Ilocano people. This research argued that the Ilocanos’ practice of atang ritual is compatible with the Catholic Doctrine on the Communion of Saints. This study utilized descriptive and contextual approaches in doing inculturation. It used the purposive sampling technique to Ilocano participants and discussed the development of doing a local theology of atang ritual in the faith of Ilocano Catholics. Results of the study revealed that the atang ritual has significant implications in the faith of the Ilocano Catholics in terms of the importance of remembering the dead as way to elaborate the doctrine of the communion of Saints. Thus, the concept of the communion of saints can be understood in the context of food offering for the dead.*

*Keywords: Ilocano atang, Communion of Saints, a food offering, dead/departed*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The article attempts to describe and explain the Ilocano practice of *atang* ritual in the Philippines by doing a local theology through the Catholic doctrine on the communion of saints. The ritual practices, sacred beliefs, and relationships intertwine in ways both material and immaterial. Such crosses cultural and religious lines of both our beloved dead and our membership within the communion of saints. In general, the *atang* is known as a food offering that is intended for the dead and other spirits. It plays an important role in the Ilocano culture, as Ilocanos generally

believe that there are spirits who live among them, either of the dead or of other worlds who need to be appeased whenever they are disturbed or offended.

Anthropologically speaking, *atang* offers an interesting similarity between *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrated in Mexico and in other Latin American countries and the veneration of ancestors celebrated in China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Asian countries. The essence of *atang* is the claim that there is communication between the living and the dead. Steadman, Palmer & Tilley (1996) claimed the “universality” of

ancestor worship. Sociologically speaking, *atang* provides a deeper and continuous bond between the living and the dead. The hybridity of such beliefs allows them to be transposed, incorporated, and materialized into different rituals, practices and socialization (Beck, Bolender, Brown & Earle, 2007; Bourdieu, 1977; Sewell, 1992). Researches revealed that rituals for the dead have been an extensive practice in Asia, Africa, Korea, and Japan referring to the specific actions performed during the rites relating to the appeasement of deceased relatives and/or “ministration to their needs” (Bae, 2007). Addison (1924) mentioned the ancestor worship in Africa that “among the former every house has its shrine and its household worship, which includes the worship of ancestors. The ancestors are represented sometimes by long wooden staves carved with decorations, sometimes by heads of wood or bronze. Annual celebrations take place, usually on the anniversary of the death.” (p.158) Note that even in China, ancestor-worship in the published books and reports of missionaries condemn the rites as “idolatrous” (Addison, 1925). In other words, rituals illustrate the belief that the departed continue living in the other world. Comparative or cross-cultural studies are limited in death studies (Walter, 2005). Although the Philippines is the only Catholic country in Asia, there are numerous ritual practices for the dead. Food offering is a common practice in the Philippines where the majority of its inhabitants are Roman Catholics. According to the recent census, 80.9 percent of Filipinos describe themselves as Roman Catholics (Philippines Demographics Profile 2018). The total population of the Philippines as of 2018 is over 100 million. The Philippines boasts to be the only “Catholic/Christian country in Asia.” According to a recent survey, 77 percent of Filipino Catholic

adults consider religion to be “very important” in their lives (Social Weather Stations 2017).

From politics to rituals to *fiestas*, Catholicism remains a dominant religion in the Philippine society. This is because the Spanish rule left a legacy of Catholic tradition to the Filipinos. The Spanish Catholic missionaries relied on imaginative and theatrical presentations of stories of the Bible to help Filipinos understand the central messages of Catholicism. This colonial legacy lives on as Filipino Catholics perform rituals by making offerings which are believed to bring monetary blessings to the descendants. Nowadays, these rituals are prevalent. During *Undas* or All Saints’ Day, families flock to the cemeteries. They offer food for their dearly departed, clean their tombs, and light candles. The most common ritual practice among Filipinos is in the form of *atang* (food offering) such as the following: a) before, during and after the wake of the departed; b) death anniversary; c) illness acquired through unknown phenomena and; d) through one’s dream—referred to a bad omen (Corpuz, 2014). However, these rituals for the dead and religion are mostly gone unstudied in the Philippines (Aure, 2004).

Specifically, food offering for the dead has not received much attention among researchers in the past decades. Borgstrom & Ellis (2017) reported that there is little literature or research about death. Macdonald (2004) pointed out that “the Spanish missionaries did not tolerate any open expression of ‘pagan’ faith and all forms of pre-Catholic rituals were suppressed.” Roman Catholicism became the dominant religion in the Philippines and animistic beliefs and practices were labeled as syncretic, heretic or superstitious. As such, rituals for the dead, including *atang* were labeled as pagan or even heretic. Phelan (1959) noted that such

practices “betray the view that Christianity was for them, utterly new and in no way continuous with the pagan religion. Similarities were viewed not only as coincidental but also as the result of “diabolical mimicry” (Phelan, 1959). As such, the missionaries exert every effort to stamp out traces of the old religions that contradict Christianity. These included ritual drinking, ritual healings, and food offerings. However, Filipino Christians, especially those who are in the grassroots level, continue to practice up to the present time food offering as a form of ritual for the dead or departed loved ones. The three biggest Philippine languages have their terms for food offering - *alay* in Tagalog, *halad* in Cebuano, and *atang* in Ilocano. During wakes, one can usually find a plate with food for the dead. The food offering can also be found on the family altars with sacred pictures, images, and statues of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, St. Joseph, and the like. On such days, it is customary in the Filipino culture to gather as a family to offer prayers in remembrance of the dead or to prepare a picnic meal that is shared by the family members during and even after the death of a loved one.

A study relevant to the *atang* ritual provided a philosophical explanation on the phenomena (Nantes et.al, 2012). *Atang* is an Ilocano’s ritual practice that gives meaning in remembering the departed loved ones. It is an intangible cultural heritage of the Ilocano people (Peralta, 2012). *Atang* is a ritual practice of food offering for the dead among Filipinos. Thus, the gap that exists between the Filipino practice of food offering for the dead and the Catholic faith has been rarely investigated in the Philippines.

### Theoretical Approach

*Atang* is performed during death anniversaries

or any celebration in the family. There is no historical proof how *atang* started in the Philippines. There is no concrete ceremony when one is doing the *atang*. The ritual involves leaving a plate of food as an offering for the dead or the spirits. *Atang* is similar to *Pitik* (offering the first taste of alcohol) to the dead relatives before anyone else drinks the wine or alcohol. *Pitik* is done by either pouring a drink into a separate glass and leaving it out or pouring a little of the “taste” onto the ground (Leo, 2011). Pobre-Ynigo (1969) published his seminal work on *atang* entitled *Mourning Customs in Paoay, Ilocos Norte, Philippines*. Pobre-Ynigo mentioned that “if the mourner is a mother, she recites, often in verses, the past doings of her child and his virtues—now and the addressing him and giving him her passing words, and then again addressing the Almighty, asking His intercession for his soul and praying that He may give her strength to bear her loss.” (p.91) The traditional practice of *atang* fosters the relationship between the living and the dead, which influences the life of the family. It is remarkable that the words flow from the mourner’s lips extemporaneously, and as freely as reading from a book of verse. Riguera (1968) also mentioned a related folk ritual in Ilocos called *sumang*. For Riguera, *sumang* is a form of healing ritual which is “believed to have the power to cure a patient of frequent sickness and/or insanity; or to avert the occurrence of the same either to him or to his parents, who are liable to suffer instead of their child bearing the omens.” (p.69). *Sumang* holds some significance in that its practice, even sporadic, manifests residues of superstitions beliefs that run contrary to Catholicism.

McCullough (1995) suggested that psychological, physiological, and spiritual areas in prayer life mediate the effects of prayer. From a

psychological perspective, he claimed that prayer may activate health-promotive psychological mechanisms such as structure, meaning, and hope. From a physiological perspective, he insisted that prayer may involve neuroimmunological, cardiovascular, and electrical brain changes. He also asserted that prayer promotes health through the induction of relaxation, decreased heart rate, lessened muscle tension, and slowed breathing. He stated that prayer may change the way in which the individual appraises stressful events. He further pointed out that faith in the efficacy of prayer may stimulate spiritual discipline and a positive outcome. Henning (1981) specified that the most effective prayer behavior for a desired outcomes are: (1) the belief that the desired prayer outcome is forthcoming, (2) thanksgiving in advance, (3) personal prayer rather than public, (4) confidence that the person is praying in accordance with the will of God, and (5) promising some service to God. He said that many of life's important decisions may warrant the five approaches to prayer. Similarly, *atang* which is a form of thanksgiving and a personal communion provides a sense of confidence in the will of God and gives Him service.

Through participant observation, interview and theological reflection, the researcher gathered a number of clues to understand better the phenomenon of *atang* ritual in the northern part of the Philippines. Some are related to Catholicism that came to the Philippines from Spain and others are rooted in the pre-colonial religiosity of the people. Gerry Pierse (1991) mentioned the pre-colonial religiosity of the Philippines as animistic.

There was a great consciousness of spirits being in things. But whereas in Hindu and Buddhist mainland Asia

there was a great sense of harmony and peace with nature, in insular South-East Asia it is different. Many of the spirits, the *Dili ingon nato*, 'those not like us', were malign and to be feared. If nature, the domain of the spirits was transgressed, the spirits had to be placated by the rites of the *Babaylan*. Any disturbance of nature had to be preceded by a placating ritual. These practices still go on and Catholic sacraments or blessing are often perceived by the people as being the same sort of thing as the animistic rituals. When a priest is called to bless a house he will often notice that a chicken had been ritually slaughtered before his arrival. Against this background it is not surprising that many people should have a great fear of the dark, of trees, mountains, rivers, all places where malign spirits might be lurking. Out of this comes a great fear of being alone. It is quite logical too that there should be a fear of the inner self which one invariably meets in silence. Hence a gregarious type of prayer is preferred to meditation or just 'being' in silence. (Pierse, 1991, p. 235)

Here is a mutual interaction of culture and the Gospel where the doctrine of the communion of saints can be understood.

## 2.0 Methodology

To achieve the objectives and address the questions raised by this study, the *Transcendental Methods of Doing Theology* by Bernard Lonergan

(1971) was used. The four basic patterns of operations are: empirical, intellectual, rational and responsible based on the participants' demographics, emergent themes in their survey answers and enlighten theological doctrine on the communion of saints and development of local theology for society and the whole church. The identified emergent themes are the ones described, analyzed, and contextualized. It is very important to note the significant roles of emergent elements in doing a local theology. This study also employed a phenomenon in gaining lessons and insight for its pastoral and practical import for the Church. Lonergan sees religious conversion as a mode of self-transcendence (Hepburn, 1973).

Lonergan's *Transcendental Method* consists of four basic patterns of operations, namely: (1) The Empirical, where the theologian senses, perceives, imagines, feels, speaks, and moves, whether externally or internally. Thus, he asks the question "What is it?" to gather data; (2) the Intellectual, where the theologian asks the questions what, why, how and what for. Thus, he asks the question "Why is It?" to establish its intelligibility; (3) the Rational, where the theologian reflects, presents pieces of evidence, passes judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability of his statements while attempting to resolve the issue. Thus, he asks the question "Is it so?" to establish the truth; and, (4) the Responsible, where the theologian focuses on himself, his own operations and his in goals in order to decide what course of action should be undertaken (Lonergan, 1971). Lonergan's *Transcendental Method* in doing local theology is the appropriate instrument used by the researcher in this study. Thus, Lonergan asks the question "Is it valuable?" to arrive at what is good.

In the light of the aforementioned, this

research study critically investigated the phenomenon of the ritual of *atang* in the Ilocos Norte Region as a "locus" of descriptive and contextual approaches and doing local theology utilizing the method of Bernard Lonergan. Using a purposive sampling technique, this endeavor further employed critical discourse analysis on the implications of the Ilocanos' practice of *atang*. Various instruments like self-made questionnaire, in-depth individual interviews, and audio recordings were used to gather data. This article aimed to address the query: What is the meaning of the Ilocano's practice of *atang* ritual? Specifically, this attempted to answer: 1) What are the demographics of the participants? 2) How do Ilocanos describe the practice of *atang*? 3) How does the practice of *atang* ritual significantly enrich their Catholic Christian faith of the Ilocanos as they do local theology? The self-made questionnaire consisting of 10 items on the Ilocano practice of *atang* ritual was administered to 100 Ilocanos. The researcher summarized the results of the participants' survey answers and translated them from the Ilocano language to the English language. Thus, the researcher derived 11 key statements on the *atang* ritual (see table 2).

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

The succeeding presentations show the following results: (1) empirical results - Demographics (see Table 2) and participants' survey answers (see Table 3); (2) intellectual results - the importance of *Atang* among Ilocano participants; (3) Rational - enlightenment of theological perspective on (a) *Atang* as Anamnesis or remembrance for the dead, and (b) *atang* and the communion of saints; (4) Responsible -

development of Ilocano *Atang* local theology in relation to inculturation, norms, traditions, beliefs, attitude or behaviors, socio-economic status and Catholic faith.

### 1. Empirical: Demographics and Survey Answers

**Table 1.** Descriptive Results: Demographics (N=100)

Variables	Categories	N	%
Age	Below 18 year-old	40	40.0
	Over 18 year-old	60	60.0
Sex	Male	55	55.0
	Female	45	45.0
Civil Status	Married	49	49.0
	Single	40	40.0
	Religious/Priest	11	11.0
Religion	Catholic	75	75.0
	Christian	15	15.0
	Protestant	7	7.0
	Other	3	3.0
Do you practice <i>atang</i> ?	Yes	100	100.0
	No	0	

Table 2 shows that there are 100 respondents of which 40 (40.0%) are 18-year old; 60 (60.0%) are over 18-year-old. In terms of sex, 55 (55.0%) are Males and 45 (45.0%) are Females. In terms of civil status, 49 (49.0%) are Married; 40 (40.0%) are Single and 11 (11.0%) Religious/Priests. In terms of religion, 75 (75.0%) are Catholics, 15 (15.0%) are Christians, 7 (7.0%) Protestants and 3 (3.0%) belong to other religious denominations. All the respondents practiced the *atang* ritual.

The Key-Words-In-Context revealed the results on meaning of *atang* ritual for the Ilocano

respondents which were translated into English by the researcher. The respondents answered the main research question using their local language which is *Ilocano*. The researcher translated the important elements as well as the most important elements of doing the *atang* ritual using the dynamic equivalence.

**Table 2.** Key-Words-In-Context

	An important element	Most important element
Remembering the dead	86%	46%
Maintaining tradition	62%	32%
Expressing gratitude	60%	29%
Comforting the loved ones	55%	21%
Sense of personal satisfaction	52%	20%
Showing respect	48%	18%
Honoring the dead	32%	15%
Asking for favors	30%	15%
Curing sickness	30%	
Fulfilling responsibility	16%	
Apologizing	5%	

Using Lonergan's Transcendental Methods of Doing Theology, the researcher found out that the participants remember the dead as an important element why the Ilocanos do the *atang* (86%) and regarded such ritual as the most important element (46%). They claimed that *atang* maintains a tradition of remembering the dead; it is an expression of gratitude; it provides comfort to the loved ones; it

provides a sense of personal satisfaction; it shows respect to the dead by providing food; and it honors the dead. Some respondents also asserted that they do the *atang* to ask for favors. A peculiar element also revealed that doing *atang* can cure one's sickness in the family such as *kurad* (itch) and *lagnat* (fever). The respondents also reported that doing *atang* fulfills their responsibility. Although, some respondents reported that they do the ritual to apologize to the dead. The participants do the *atang* every day, during special occasions, during All Saints' and All Souls' Days. They also do the *atang* to cure their sickness. They also believe that *atang* is compatible with Catholic tradition.

Most of the respondents were strongly bound to "superstitious beliefs" and "fatalistic view of life." Abad (1995) believed that "the persistence of animism and fatalism, both traditional religious attitudes, in post-Vatican II Philippines reflects the continuing encounter between official and folk practices that have characterized Filipino religious behavior since the days of Spanish." (p.211)

## **2. Intellectual: Importance of *Atang***

The ritual attempts to capture the image of the sacred and the profane. The *atang* provided a material and immaterial process of interaction between tangible people and intangible soul. In Chinese culture, ancestor worship is "a way of continuing bonds with ancestors" (Hsu, O'Connor & Lee, 2009). The importance of food can be seen in the Ilocano practice of *atang*. Food is a symbol that takes flesh in human relationships and solidarity. For the Ilocanos, the *atang* is a symbol of offering for the dead. Bridging the Ilocano culture and the Catholic faith was a process the Church called inculturation and it involved the incorporation of the cultural and religious elements of the

Ilocano *atang* into Catholic belief and practices. Inculturation is to "make the concern and the process for making the Gospel meaningful and challenging within a specific cultural context" (De Mesa, 1987). During the celebration of the wake and remembering the dead, food and drinks are shared with visitors. *Atang* plays an important role in Ilocano culture, as Ilocanos generally believe that there are spirits who live among us, either of the dead or of other worlds who need to be appeased whenever they are disturbed or offended (Dunuan, 2016). *Atang* is also synonymous with *umras*. However, some interpret *umras* as the ritual and *atang* being the food being offered per se during the ritual.

In the old Ilocano households especially those in the rural areas, the belief that the souls of the dead come back nine days after leaving the world of the living persists today. So the Ilocano families prepare food for their dead as a welcome gesture for their brief return to their respective ancestral homes (Coloma, 2015). *Atang* is practiced during numerous occasions such as: a) before, during and after the wake of the departed; b) death anniversary; c) illness acquired through unknown phenomena and; d) through one's dream—referred to a bad omen (Corpuz, 2014). The Ilocano people would offer something to the departed because they believe that their spirit still lingers around. In this sense, death is not the end of life but a continuum in space and time. So death may be the first of last things, but it is not the end—it is a continuation of life in another dimension. It is about the "whole creation groaning" towards what the Book Revelation calls the "new heavens and the new earth" (New American Bible, 2010, Rev. 20:1; Is. 65:17).

Whenever Filipinos talk about food, it would

be unthinkable to them without mentioning rice (De Mesa, 2005). Rice on occasions such as wake and remembrance of the dead would be common. *Kanin* (Rice) is a staple and thus a very rich cultural symbol for Filipinos especially when they consider the different ways rice is prepared. The importance of food is seen in Catechism for Filipino Catholics: "Filipinos are meal-oriented (*salu-salo, kainan*). Because Filipinos consider almost everyone as part of their family (*parang pamilya*), we are known for being "gracious hosts and grateful guests. Serving our guests with the best we have is an inborn value to Filipinos, rich and poor alike" (Catechism for Filipino Catholics, 2005).

Results of the in-depth individual interviews with the respondents revealed that there are different components of the *atang* which are: the *dudul, pilais, suman, baduya* (snacks of sticky rice cake), *busi* (popped rice), *balisongsong or patopat, linapet, linga* (rice with black sesame seeds), *bagas* (uncooked rice) set on a crucifixion form with *itlog* (fresh egg placed on its top), and *lugaw* (rice porridge). All these are served after the ritual. After the prayers for the dead, the prayer leader takes home the rice. Aside from different offerings related to rice, they would also offer other items such as *gawed and apog* (betel nut and powder), *basi* (native wine), *tabako* (tobacco), and other food or things that the deceased used to eat when he/she was still alive.

### 3. Rational: Theological Perspective of *Atang*

#### a) *Atang* as Anamnesis or Remembrance for the dead

Results showed that *atang* is a form of *anamnesis* or remembrance for the dead before (*atong*), during the wake, and after the wake (on the grave, *gulgol*, death anniversaries, *undas*)

and after dreaming about the dead relatives of the Ilocano respondents. It is thought that the dead can benefit the living with extra-worldly wisdom, whereas the living benefits the dead through prayers, sacrifices, and commemoration such as *atang*. This remembering of the dead can be seen in the Ilocano culture and in many Asian cultures as well. The respondents visit the graves of their relatives and offer food and drinks while they say their prayers for the repose of the souls of the dead. This practice honors their ancestors who are believed to partake and eat food with them. Although ancestor veneration is a common practice in Asia, the Ilocano *atang* is an example of an inculturated practice to explain the mutual interaction of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the human experiences. Communion of saints can be seen as part of the Judeo-Christian tradition while *atang* can be seen as part of the human experience of the Ilocano in venerating their ancestors. This explains why the Ilocanos would always remember their departed through *atang*—food offering coupled with Catholic *lualo* (prayers and hymns). This is done to express the communion that the family shared with the deceased and to give thanks for their life.

Veneration of the saints has been a practice of the Catholic culture worldwide, but there was a concern too much Catholic preoccupation with saints opened the way for the "encroachment of superstitious practices" (McBrien, 1981). However, any "abuses, excesses or defects" that may have developed in the ritual sacrifice must be removed or corrected. Blair and Robertson (1903) enumerated some of the early forms of religious life in the Philippine islands in their work *Relation of the Conquest of the Island of Luzon* such as a few details of a ritual feast (*manganito*) dedicated



to *Bathala* and *Diwata*, communal meal, offerings of food and “wine” to an idol, prayers, and the presence of a *babaylan*. These are some of the early practices associated with the *atang* ritual and it is different from what the Catholic Church teaches about the Veneration of Saints.

However, *atang* as *anamnesis* is an inculturated form of liturgy among Ilocano Catholics to remember their dead loved ones in belief that they are in communion with the saints and Jesus Christ as the Savior. In fact, the *lualo* (prayer) itself is *anamnesis* or remembering of Jesus Christ. Chupungco (1992) posited the Paschal Mystery (i.e. Passion, Death, and Resurrection) of Jesus Christ and the theology of liturgical inculturation as an *anamnesis* (Chupungco, 1992). Thus, the importance of *atang* as *anamnesis* is manifested in Christ’s *anamnesis* as an integral component of the Sacred Eucharist. For the people, *atang* shows how the Ilocanos instinctively recall the memory of their loved ones by praying and giving food and drinks. It poses great challenge to theologians and liturgists to be more sensitive to the needs of the people.

### **b) *Atang* and the Communion of Saints**

The departed ancestors are thought of as being part of the life of every human on earth. *Atang* is tied up with the notion of memorializing the dead and providing for their continued comfort after death. Steadman, Palmer & Tilley (1996) noted that “though the worship of ancestors is not universal, a belief in the immortality of the dead occurs in all cultures” (p.72) This universality of ancestor worship calls for inculturation in the light of the Christian understanding of death (eschatology). The theological meaning of *atang* as a form of communion with the whole Mystical

Body of Jesus Christ is to honor “with great respect the memory of the dead; and because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins’ she offers her suffrages for them” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997). According to Jocano (1966) “Saints, in many rural areas, are conceived by the farmers not as Church personalities who have been canonized because of their good work and virtuous living but as supernatural beings with powers similar to those of environmental spirits or the “*engkanto*.” Moreover, the Ilocano practice of the *atang* ritual is a form of prayer for the dead whom they believe are capable not only of helping the departed, but also of making their intercession very effective. In other words, the faithful believe that the saints intercede for the living and for those in purgatory. The faithful perform many rituals in venerating and invoking the saints. The Catholic Church asserts that the bond between the living and the dead can be found in the ancient creed: “I believe in ...the communion of saints.” Steadman, Palmer & Tilley (1996) provides explanation for the interaction between the living and the dead: “To explain why claims of communication between the living and the dead appear to occur universally, we suggest that it is necessary to understand that the spirits of the dead are those of ancestors. This suggests that religions are closely linked to kinship relations in indigenous society because “[i]n such societies, it might not be an exaggeration to say that kinship relations are tantamount” (p. 73).

The Church as a communion of saints means “the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ, is both represented and brought about” (Flannery, 1982). The communion of saints can refer to the communion of Christ’s holy people, those on pilgrimage, those being purified, and those

already in glory as manifested concretely in Filipino Catholics' celebration of November 1-2; or in holy things: like the Church's teaching, communal life, sacraments and charity (Cunningham, n.d.). Saints are honored in Catholic Christianity because the faithful recognize their supernatural excellence based on the belief that they are in heaven. The Second Vatican Council teaches, "that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love" (Flannery, 1982). This ecclesiological vision of Vatican II focuses on the unity of community, ordinary life of every believer and in communion with the Saints, that the departed loved ones (family, friends, those named in the official liturgical calendar as Blessed or Saints) and those known only by God, are called the community of love. Thus, *atang* is a clear manifestation of the communion of saints practiced in local culture. Gathje (2016) reflected upon the theological statements made across centuries about the communion of saints as shown that the connection between the living and the dead.

#### **4. Responsibility: Developing in the Local Theology of Ilocanos' practice of *Atang* in the Philippines**

The practice of Ilocano *atang* ritual in the Philippines provides an alternative way of understanding the development of the local theology of (1) *atang* as anamnesis, and (2) *atang* and the communion with saints that is geared towards enrichment and appreciation of the Ilocanos' Catholic Faith as a form of an inculturated practice of the local Church. Results of this study showed that there must be an emphasis on trust and learning, on participation, dialogue, co-responsibility and on the Church

as a communication. This process of elaborating together the vision of the Gospel, to communicate it within and outside the community, and, more importantly, striving to realize it in concert with others in the development of people in a most profound and real sense.

For the Ilocano Catholics, they pay homage to their ancestors during *umras* (honoring the dead). The central idea to ancestor worship is the belief in the continuing existence of the dead and in close relation between the living and the dead (who continue to influence the affairs of the living) which this research claimed as eschatological. Pictures of the deceased parents can be found in many Ilocano, Chinese, and Filipino homes even long after they are dead where they also offer the *atang*. For Ilocanos, November 1 is a real family picnic at the cemetery. Some cultures think of this as bizarre for flowers, candles, and food are brought to the graves. The family prays the rosary in honor of the dead. Laughter can be heard as friends and relatives drop by the grave to bring some flowers or say their personal prayer, too. Religious hymns blend with karaoke songs in a nearby grave. A blessing of holy water is followed by a big banquet on top of tombs with food and drinks for all—for the dead included.

Results of the study revealed that the local Church has a significant responsibility to honor the dead loved ones through the Ilocanos' practice of the *atang* ritual. Thus, this study established the inherent connection of *atang* to the Communion of Saints as three distinct but related states in ecclesiology as a way of life and responsibility of the local Church. From the early church history, Christians in Rome did a similar practice of food offering for the dead.

Such loving times in the recall of

the dead went on for as long as the celebrants' mood and their wine might last, even as an "all-nighter," a *vigilia*. The dead themselves participated. They needed such remembrances for their tranquil existence in the Beyond. They were to be offered whatever food was at hand and, most especially, a toast in wine to be tipped onto their sarcophagus or into a pipe leading down to the head-end where they rested, athirst and happy. A party mood was essential. Participants, if they were challenged to defend the bad behavior that might attend too much eating and drinking, answered indignantly that loving thoughts, respect, and the recollection of fleshly pleasures offered to ancestors whose favor was certainly of more effect than any mere humans?—all this was not just picnicking. This was religion." (Macmullen, 2010, p. 603)

In summary, a relationship between *atang* and communion of saints as a way to deal with the continuing relationship of the living and the dead exists. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) described communion of saints as three distinct but related states in ecclesiology: the Church triumphant, the Church suffering and the Church militant. The destiny of the Church is the full realization of this communion in the Kingdom of God. We are pilgrims, because "joined with Christ in the Church and signed with the Holy Spirit 'who is the pledge of our inheritance,' we have not yet appeared with Christ in the state of glory in which we shall be like God since we shall see Him as He

is" (Flannery, 1982). Pope Francis reminds us that "In the Christian understanding of the world, the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning: 'All things have been created through him and for him' (New American Bible, 2010). In other words, at the end of time, Jesus Christ will deliver all things to God, the Father, so that God may be everything to everyone as Pope Francis emphasized. In these terms, then, the central character of *atang* as remembering the dead must be recognized as communion of the living and the dead.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ilocano practice of *atang* ritual is a form of remembering the dead and can serve as model of the doctrine of the communion of saints. This concept contributes to the understanding of the religious and cultural significance of food offering for the dead in terms of empirical, intellectual, rational and responsible aspects. Remembering the dead through *atang* provides a positive outcome. There is inculturation of faith in relation to the Ilocano indigenous practices in doing a local theology. This study unearthed the true meaning and goal of the communion of saints as seen in the Ilocano *atang* ritual, which is not simply an indigenous belief but also a form of religious inculturation. *Atang* is tied up with the notion of memorializing the dead and providing for their continued comfort after death. This model calls for a renewed understanding of *atang* in the light of the Christian understanding of death related to eschatology. Moreover, *atang* which is a form of prayer for the dead is capable not only of helping the departed, but also of interceding for them. In short, the faithful believe

that the saints intercede for the living and those in purgatory. *Atang* can be understood alternatively in the light of developing a local theology based on Bernard Lonergan's Transcendental Methods of Doing Theology. It is suggested then that other Filipino indigenous practices, norms, beliefs, culture, and traditions be explored to strengthen local theology in the country. Henceforth, it is recommended that *atang* be not categorized as 'Split-level Christianity' nor as Syncretism because the belief in the communion of the living, the dead or departed, and the communion of saints, is significant and inherent to the faith of Filipino Catholics.

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