

“Happy birthday, Jesus.” Beneath this familiar Christmas greeting lies a demanding idea: God did not address humanity’s deepest failure from a distance. He did not issue instructions from afar or rely on intermediaries alone. He came near. He entered history. He took on flesh. Emmanuel, God with us, was not an abstraction, a slogan, or a policy statement. He was presence made real, authority made visible, and commitment made costly.

The Gospel of John captures this with stark clarity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Logos, or word, did not remain theoretical. After four centuries of waiting, God did not send another commandment or reform agenda. He sent Himself. Salvation came not only with truth, but with proximity.

That choice offers a powerful lens for governance in the Philippines today. If the central failure of humanity required God’s incarnate presence, then persistent national failures —weak institutions, uneven growth, recurring corruption, vulnerability to disasters, and political exclusion — cannot be resolved by plans, budgets, and rhetoric alone. They require a government that is likewise with the people: present in execution, visible in accountability, and credible in leadership.

WAITING, THEN ACTING

Before Christ’s coming, Israel endured long periods of conquest, decline, and silence. Institutions weakened. Authority was imposed rather than trusted. Hope narrowed. The people waited.

The waiting ended not with a decree but with action. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God entered the constraints of human life — time, space, vulnerability. Presence was not symbolic; it was costly.

Many Filipinos should recognize a familiar waiting today. Economic growth is reported, budgets expand, and reform programs are announced. Yet for millions, progress feels abstract. It is remote. Prices rise faster than wages. Taxes oppress both households and business. Public services fall short. Disasters expose gaps in project design and execution, as well as in preparedness and response. The recurring question is not philosophical but practical: *Where is the government when it matters?*

PRESENCE AS A GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

In contrast, Jesus’ ministry was defined by proximity. He taught where people gathered, healed

Emmanuel and the politics of presence

SIGNS AND WONDERS
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where suffering was visible, and confronted abuses of authority directly. He did not operate through distant intermediaries. He bore the costs of engagement — misunderstanding, opposition, and the cross.

This offers a direct parallel to governance as we know it in the Philippines. Presence is not sentiment; it is a governing principle. It means policies designed with real conditions in mind, leaders accountable for outcomes, and institutions that do not retreat behind procedure when results fall short.

In the Philippine context, governance often relies on form rather than substance. Development frameworks are comprehensive, but execution is performative and inconsistent. Laws are passed, but enforcement is uneven. Authority exists, yet responsibility is diffused and denied.

BUDGETS AS INCARNATION OR ITS ABSENCE

If Emmanuel is truth embodied, then the budget is where government either becomes real — or remains a ghost. A budget should translate intention into action, priorities into programs, and authority into results.

Yet the national budget increasingly reveals a gap between design and delivery. While the executive proposes the initial expenditure budget, the legislative process introduces extensive dubious insertions that fragment priorities. Projects end up with weak links to agency mandates. Funds are divided into localized items that are politically attractive but administratively difficult to monitor.

This mirrors a government that speaks but does not dwell, announcing priorities without fully inhabiting their consequences. Implementing agencies are tasked to execute projects they neither planned nor evaluated, blurring accountability when outcomes disappoint. We see these today in the unfolding flood control scandal.

Unprogrammed appropriations in this country have destroyed the budget process. Intended as contingent spending, they have expanded to levels that effectively create a parallel budget. This weakens fiscal discipline and expands discretion, especially when revenue assumptions



A FLOOD CONTROL-THEMED nativity scene is displayed among the entries in the Belen Making Contest at the MBC Media Group building in Pasay City, Dec. 13.

prove optimistic. Like authority exercised without presence, spending authority without assured funding or clear safeguards erodes credibility.

In contrast, an “Emmanuel” approach to budgeting would emphasize clarity of purpose, restraint in discretion, and accountability in execution. It would favor fewer, well-designed programs over many fragmented ones, and outcomes over announcements.

POLITICAL DYNASTIES AND THE PROBLEM OF DISTANCE

No discussion of absence and distance in Philippine governance is complete without confronting the role of political dynasties. For decades, power has been concentrated in a narrow set of families that dominate both national and local offices, often across generations.

Dynastic politics creates a form of representation that is formal but hollow. Officials may occupy office continuously, yet governance remains distant because accountability is internalized within families rather than exercised by institutions or voters. Public office becomes an inherited asset rather than a public trust.

We are familiar with the story that concentration of power weakens competition, discourages merit, and limits the entry of new leadership. It also helps explain why budget distortions persist. Congressional insertions, discretionary allocations, and localized projects often serve to entrench political networks

rather than address systemic needs. In the Philippines, the budget has become a tool of political maintenance rather than national transformation.

In our system, government presence is selective. It is felt during elections, ribbon-cuttings, or moments of patronage — but absent in sustained service delivery, national calamities, institutional reform, and long-term investment. The poor encounter government episodically, not consistently. At various levels, many public servants transact, but they rarely transform.

Emmanuel represents the opposite logic. God did not send representatives to act in His place while remaining distant. He came Himself. Dynastic politics, by contrast, multiplies intermediaries while insulating the elected from accountability. Philippine dynasties produce continuity without reform.

AUTHORITY THAT ACCEPTS COST

After the resurrection, Scripture tells us that Jesus declared that all authority had been given to Him. He then delegated it, sending others to preach, disciple, and baptize. The call is to teach and serve. Authority, in this model, is inseparable from cost and accountability.

This stands in tension with contemporary governance shaped by dynastic protection. Filipino politics dictates authority should expand, but risk is socialized and responsibility diluted. Oversight institutions struggle to penetrate entrenched networks. Audit find-

ings recur — overpricing, delays, weak procurement — yet sanctions are uneven and slow. Worse, as in the flood control anomaly, audit could be compromised.

The parallel is instructive. Emmanuel did not avoid the cost of engagement. Philippines-style governance avoids cost and inevitably retreats into distance and defensiveness.

INSTITUTIONS REFLECT COMMITMENT

Jesus’ parable of the soils offers another parallel. Systems, like hearts, fail when commitment is shallow or divided. Reform collapses when resistance carries no cost and integrity no protection.

Institutions weakened by political accommodation lose their capacity to deliver. Budgets distorted by narrow interests cannot produce inclusive growth. And when enforcement is selective, trust declines, raising the economic cost of compliance, investment, and reform.

An Emmanuel-centered governance framework demands institutions that are present where rules are tested: procurement, regulation, taxation, and justice. Presence here means consistency, not perfection.

EMMANUEL AS A TEST OF ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

The prophet Isaiah spoke of light breaking into darkness. Apostle Paul described power that chose restraint and service. Emmanuel is not sentiment; it is a standard.

Applied to economic leadership, the test is straightforward. Does government show up where risks are highest and returns politically lowest? Does the budget protect long-term capacity or merely accommodate dynastic bargaining? Do institutions correct failure or normalize it?

Just as salvation required God’s presence, development requires leadership that resists distortion, disciplines discretion, and accepts accountability. It’s about time that the Filipinos experienced government not through speeches but through stable prices, robust growth, efficient services, more jobs, and institutionalized fairness.

CHRISTMAS WITHOUT DISTANCE

Christmas, then, is not about comfort. It is about proximity and responsibility. Emmanuel challenges our leaders to govern without distance — budgets that reflect priorities rather than bargaining power, institutions that enforce rules rather than negotiate them, and political systems that open space for merit, renewal, and accountability.

For Filipinos, the implication is equally direct. Distance, dynastic dominance, impunity, and indifference persist because they are tolerated. The Philippines will therefore be shaped less by ideals than by what they accept as normal.

Jesus’ promise — “I am with you always” — offers assurance, but it also establishes a standard for public leadership. Isaiah makes the implication explicit: with Emmanuel, “the government shall be upon His shoulder.” Authority, in this vision, is not distant or delegated away. It is borne personally, tested in crisis, and exercised in full view of the people. Presence matters most in times of calamity. Leadership matters when institutions falter and citizens are disillusioned and angry. And integrity matters because the Philippines today is in urgent need of clear, credible moral purpose.

With Emmanuel, the challenge is not symbolic. Rising to it means building a government that is with the people. It is the difference between policy that exists on paper and governance that works in practice. ■

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ChatGPT will never beat Indiana Jones

By Elon Danziger

ACROSS from the Florence Cathedral in Italy stands a much older church, the Baptistery of San Giovanni. It is a beloved center of religious life, where many Florentines are baptized to this day. Staid columns and lively arches hug its eight sides, half-camouflaged in patterns of green and white marble.

Without the baptistery’s emulation of the architecture of ancient Rome, it’s hard to imagine Florence birthing the architectural Renaissance that changed the face of Europe. Yet for centuries, there has been no compelling solution as to who built it and when and for what reasons. Decades ago, I gave tours of the baptistery and came to revere it, and in the early 2020s I began delving into its origins.

After years of poring over historical documents and reading voraciously, I made an important discovery that was: The baptistery was built not by Florentines but for Florentines — specifically, as part of a collaborative effort led by Pope Gregory VII after his election in 1073. My revelation happened just before the explo-

sion of artificial intelligence (AI) into public consciousness, and recently I began to wonder: Could a large language model like ChatGPT, with its vast libraries of knowledge, crack the mystery faster than I did?

So as part of a personal experiment, I tried running three AI chatbots — ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini — through different aspects of my investigation. I wanted to see if they could spot the same clues I had found, appreciate their importance and reach the same conclusions I eventually did.

But the chatbots failed. Though they were able to parse dense texts for information relevant to the baptistery’s origins, they ultimately couldn’t piece together a wholly new idea. They lacked essential qualities for making discoveries.

There are a few reasons for this. Large language models have read more text than any human could ever hope to. But when AI reads text, it’s merely picking up patterns. Peculiar details, outlier data and unusual perspectives that can influence thinking can get lost.

Without eccentric or contrarian ideas, I never would have made my discoveries. For example, in

his 2006 book *Toscana Romanica*, Guido Tigler, a professor at the University of Florence, argued the baptistery was built later than generally believed. It’s an idea that’s not widely accepted, and I believe that’s the reason the chatbots never presented it to me when I asked them what they would read to solve the enigma of the baptistery.

Although I ultimately found reason to reject the later dating, Mr. Tigler’s unorthodox ideas taught me

to more strongly consider the possibility that past scholarship had gotten the timeline for the baptistery wrong.

For centuries, many people believed Pope Nicholas II consecrated the baptistery in 1059. There is actually no known record of such an event; its existence is based on an assumption drawn from documents that show his involvement with other Florentine churches that year.

When I nudged the chatbots to discover this discrepancy themselves, ChatGPT and Claude



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found it but failed to observe that it was suspicious, whereas Gemini hallucinated evidence that would eliminate this discrepancy. To contribute to a field of knowledge, you need to accurately survey the landscape, sniff out what’s fishy and demonstrate why it’s rotten. Large language models have trouble on all three counts.

And here’s the deeper problem: Sometimes pattern recognition, human and machine, is wrong. Though there was no confirming evidence, most scholars had simply assumed the patrons

of the baptistery were Florentine. After all, a vast majority of church building in the Middle Ages was driven by local people: bishops, abbots, wealthy families. But from my readings I began to agree more and more with a fringe view that the inhabitants of 11th century Florence were still too poor and provincial to produce such an accomplished building.

The key to identifying who built the baptistery was how much its architecture is inspired by the an-

cient Pantheon in Rome. By the 11th century, the Pantheon had become a church officiated only by the pope. Once you take Pope Nicholas out of the equation and focus on pontiffs obsessed with ancient Rome, only one name for our mystery patron comes to mind: Gregory VII.

A few years before Gregory’s election in 1073, Florentines had stopped having their children baptized in Florence, fearful that a reputedly corrupt bishop could not protect their infants’ souls. After an event proved the bish-

op’s unworthiness and sent him packing, the formidable rulers of Florence (and all of Tuscany), Beatrice of Bar and her daughter Matilda, seem to have made amends to the city by working with Gregory to give it a magnificent new baptistery. The sumptuous evocation of Roman splendor in the heart of Florence is exactly the kind of church architecture Gregory would have patronized.

Synthesizing so many pieces of medieval history into a new interpretation required stepping back and reconsidering their importance and how they relate to one another. AI may be able to optimize the process of collecting those pieces, but discovery means drawing new connections — something far beyond current AI capabilities, as the tests I did confirmed to me.

Discovery remains a human endeavor and is propelled by the very human quality to see oddities that don’t fit patterns and by probing them more deeply. ■

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