

About this Issue

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MST Review 26, no. 1 (2024) intertwines the two themes of ecclesiology and religious education by focusing on the role of the youth as children, students, and Church faithful. Engaging and offering alternatives to traditional social and ecclesial expectations, these article contributions challenge the prevalent view that the youth are ‘incapable’ of self-direction and discovering their contribution to the Church's ecclesial processes. Such a marginalizing perspective reinforces the idea that only adults are competent to lead the Church as active members while belittling the youth as passive followers. By pastoral implication, it cultivates paternalistic practices that affect the youth's social relationships, their capacity to learn, and their social application of the faith. Adult-led processes or decisions, even if they are products of long experience, however, do not necessarily mean continuing relevance, social inclusivity, or effective responsiveness to the younger generation of Church members.

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke's article “Of Skeptics and Believers: Observing the Synod on Synodality from the Margins” discusses the faithful's attitudes, tendencies, and concerns toward Pope Francis's initiative on Synod on Synodality. Following the synthesis reports from different countries, Okpaleke observes an attitude of indifference among the Church faithful regarding the Synodal process. Such attitude is especially seen among the youth, who are regarded as marginalized in the process and have the tendency to be attracted to traditional Catholicism that emphasizes spirituality as its source of the Church's stable relationship with God. This tension raises the question whether synodality is a viable path to reform Church structures. To address this

issue, communal discernment must be cultivated through listening and humility to avoid the extreme outcomes of having an “*unreversed pyramid*” clericalist Church or a “*reversed pyramid*” anti-clerical Church. In this regard, Synodality should clarify its objectives (what) and the reasons (why) for taking this process in response to the internal and external crises that the Church has encountered in recent times. While Synodality also entails entertaining different ideologies, which has been fostering skepticism among the traditional faithful, not listening to non-traditional positions could denote that the Church is not following Synodality's emphasis on walking together with its members. Thus, Okpaleke suggests different “gradations of listening” to avoid extreme ideologies that could either polarize or fragment the Church amidst the tensions of the need to accompany the faithful while keeping its moral teachings.

Levy Lara Lanaria's article “*Sambahayan ng Diyos and the Four Creedal Attributes*” appropriates the concept of ‘*sambahayan ng Diyos*’ (family household of God) to make the four marks of the Catholic Church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) culturally relevant in the Filipino context. *Sambahayanan*, goes beyond the limited practice of a nuclear family by including non-kin family members as part of a household. In this regard, unity is expressed as *pagkakaisa* (unity) of children (*mga anak*) not through social, ethnic, or kinship ties but under God's parenthood whose relationships are founded on mutual respect (*ginagalang*) and filial gratitude (*utang na loob*). Holiness is animated by *sambahayanan's* familial spirituality dwelling in the household, grounded on the Trinitarian God's divine calling to bridge strife and division in the world by challenging unjust social structures. *Sambahayanan* expresses catholicity through its outward orientation to

encompass the whole world and live under God's household by going beyond "ethnic parochialism" or "social individualism" through cultural dialogue. Lastly, *sambahayanan's* apostolicity refers to its missionary endeavor inherited from the apostles by continuing God's mission to care for the poor. *Sambahayanan* as a Filipino ecclesial model is thus a dynamic verb geared toward an inclusivist missionary orientation instead of a static noun resting on traditional, exclusivist, and ahistorical principles.

Julius Anthony L. Porqueriño's article "Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Insights for Catholic Schools in the Philippines" offers alternative strategies to nurture children's spirituality in Catholic schools in the Philippines. The traditional approach to spirituality views children as "empty vessels" that must be filled by adults so that they can spiritually mature. This approach, however, reduces children's spirituality in terms of linear development that is dependent on the adult's supervision. Porqueriño argues that children are "competent subjects" who have their ways of expressing spirituality, stressing that a "nurturing spirituality" is a better strategy to recognize their subjectivity since it promotes their resilience of character, participation in the community, and holistic understanding of the person as an active subject. As framework, Porqueriño sees that Catholic schools can practice "nurturing spirituality" in the child's 1) physical, emotional, and auditory spaces, 2) time to focus on the present through dialogue-oriented processes, 3) body to nurture them into well-rounded individuals, 4) relationships to learn trust and intimacy in a spiritual community that allows them to see their selves, the world around them, and the transcendent, and 5) agency by recognizing their "power within" to balance the power dynamics of "power with" and "power over" them to foster healthy relationships.

Lastly, Romela D. Sanga and Ferdinand D. Dagmang's article "The Kingdom of God in Selected Christian Living Education Modules viewed through Jesus of Nazareth's Vision of the Reign of God" selects ten Christian Living Education (CLE) modules for junior and senior high schools in Metro Manila to evaluate them from the perspective of Jesus of Nazareth's ministry to actualize the kingdom of God as a response to Roman Empire's violent rule in ancient Palestine. Following Richard Horsley's imperial reading of the gospels, Sanga and Dagmang see that although the selected CLE modules affirm the kingdom of God's centrality, they also see the pedagogical gap that links Jesus's historical context with his transcendental vision. The CLE modules overlooked the sociopolitical and economic factors influencing the Christian narrative through its modern tendency to 'spiritualize', 'intellectualize', or 'individualize' the kingdom of God by detaching it from worldly issues. This problem fundamentally affects how Christian discipleship is taught to students by its emphasis on the idealized view of Jesus whose tendencies lean toward attaining salvation through 'cheap grace' while forgetting the practical costs of Christian discipleship through its prophetic dimension to fight the structural causes of poverty, injustices, and violence.

In addition to the usual scholarly contributions, the present issue also publishes Stephen Bevans' paper "Filipino, Theologian, Friend: Celebrating his Life, Remembering his Genius, Cherishing his Memory"—a tribute to José M. de Mesa's (1946-2021) contribution to theology as one of the pioneering and prominent theologians in the Philippines. Written in commemoration of De Mesa's third death anniversary, Bevans' eulogy reflects on De Mesa's sources of theological inspiration. Bevans highlights De Mesa's strong love for

the Filipino culture and language to do theology which led to a better understanding of the discipline among students. He also explains the concepts of *pagdama* (intuitive feeling), *kagandahang loob* (the person's beautiful inner self), and *ginhawa* (holistic well-being) as De Mesa's key pivoting themes for doing Filipino inculturated theology. Last but not the least, Bevans reminisces De Mesa as a father, a personal friend, and theological collaborator in various theological and pastoral institutions.

On behalf of the MST Review's Editorial Board, I hope these articles will foster joy and hope especially for those who passionately accompany the youth as active members of the Church community to emulate Jesus and help actualize the kingdom of God. As Pope Francis stated during the welcoming ceremony at the World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal (1-6 August 2023), God has "called by name" every one of us despite being sinners as a Church community that loves, invites, and welcomes¹ It is thus crucial to recognize the youth's capacity, creativity, and contributions to building an inclusive Church that gives room to everyone.

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¹ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness," *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Portugal on the Occasion of the XXXVII World Youth Day (2-6 August 2023)*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230803-portogallo-cerimonia-accoglienza.html> (accessed 29 June 2024).

Of Skeptics and Believers: Observing the Synod on Synodality from the Margins

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke

Abstract: From a theological perspective, this article explores the degree of anticipation, indifference, and critique regarding the Synod on Synodality, beginning from the concerns expressed at the national, continental, and universal syntheses, the essential elements of synodality in Pope Francis' teachings, the expectations of young people as well as those who voice their concerns on the digital space. To an extent, it is a theological evaluation of the margins mostly expressed in the public space regarding the objectives that the Synod sets out to realize, which raises the question of the validity and practicality of the claim that synodality offers the Church an opportunity to reform itself. If the invitation to synodality is to be valid, how can it overcome the problems of ideological divides and pseudo-propheticism? Overall, this article explores how the Synod on Synodality presents a chance and an opportunity for the Church in its struggle to remain faithful to the Catholic faith.

Keywords: Synod • Synodality • Pseudo-propheticism • Pope Francis • Indifference • Church

The synodal project and the taint of indifference

Various national syntheses¹ in the current synodal process dedicated sections to outlining the difficulties and challenges that dioceses face, and sometimes in direct reference to the organization of the synodal conversation. In almost all of the reports, there is an observation that most people are generally getting disinterested in Church life, and even more in the

¹ One can find the official documents of the Synod on Synodality, including the syntheses at the various stages and of the First Session of the Synod, at the website of the secretariat. See <https://www.synod.va/en/resources.html> (accessed 27 December 2023).

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conversation on synodality. The Belgian report states that there are "insufficient number of volunteers" as well as the "absence of young people, which raises the question of the transmission of the faith to the next generations." Similarly, the US report also mentions "a deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people." Most of these are either disinterested or have been discouraged by the crises that plague the Church and the world. In what is even a very direct way, the Nigerian report mentions that "some (of the faithful) remained indifferent to the whole synodal process because they felt it will yield no fruit and that it will be business as usual." The same problem was mentioned in the Hungarian report. For these people, much has been said while little is done in concretely renewing the Church. Even the encouragement to 'speak out' is hindered by "mistrust due to breach of confidentiality." More still, for the Church in Japan, there is a "weakening of solidarity" in the Church and the hesitation to evangelize. These and many factors, including ineffective communication, contribute to apathy in local communities.

Even the Synthesis Report of the First Session of the Synod on Synodality bears markers of non-consensus in its tripartite methodology. Under the sub-title 'matters for consideration' which is sandwiched between 'convergences' and 'proposals', individual chapters of the three parts of the Synthesis point to areas of tension that "summarise points about which it is necessary to continue deepening our understanding pastorally, theologically, and canonically." The Synthesis further describes this section as similar to "being at a crossroads where we need to pause so we can understand better the direction we need to take." It is a clear recognition that the dialogue within the Synod, even where it represents a culmination of a bottom-top process of conversation, cannot exhaustively resolve the questions and concerns

that people have, not only in specific issues for deliberation but also in the deliberation process itself. This implies that conversely, the Synod cannot be indifferent to the genuine concerns of the faithful, even where they express dissenting opinions towards the Synod.

In the light of the above, there is a concern about the presence of indifference in promoting the goal of synodality. Given the crises in the Church, it may not have been unexpected. Thus, the program of synodality is aimed at pulling through the hard wall of indifference, justified or not, to rediscover a lively, dynamic, and joyful Church in which every faithful will be eager to belong and in whose life, they would wish to participate. Often the apathy is blamed on the hierarchy in the Church, but there is a difference between the *reality* of hierarchy and the *practice* of hierarchy. Pope Francis while describing synodality as constitutive of the identity of the Church, insists that it “offers us the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”² What is left unsaid is the inappropriate interpretation of hierarchical ministry that replaces ‘service’ with ‘power’ leading to a disordered sense of ministry, and which has over the years created a lot of cynicism in the Church. Interestingly there is an evident presence of a synodal spirit in the life and ministry of the Pope himself, a fact that renders his words credible rather than an example of empty, diplomatic lip service. Indeed, the emergence of Pope Francis ignited a lot of excitement among many people both within and outside the Church and held a lot of promises in terms of the

² Pope Francis, Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed 20 December 2023).

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yearning for a new face of the Church – a Church that listens and is open to both God and the world. It was, so to say, an anticipation of the deepening of the *sensus fidelium* in profound ways. It was therefore not a surprise from Pope Francis’ earliest actions that we might end up with a Synod on synodality at the end of the day. A good ecclesialogist would easily have predicted that.

The imagination of a renewed Church, defined by the idea of synodality expressed in its very key concepts – listening, discernment, communion, participation, and structure of governance – was thus clearly present in Pope Francis’ programmatic Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013).³ A clear reading of the encyclical uncovers how, from the outset, the Pope has remained consistent in calling the Church to the pathway of reform and renewal that is guided by the Holy Spirit. This clarion call is not only defined by *what is to be done* but also by *what we are called to be* as a Church, some sort of renewed self-understanding that is well articulated in the ecclesiology of synodality. As such while the transformation of structure remains important, the fundamental “ecclesial conversation” that guarantees “openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ” remains indispensable. The Pope contends that “even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining, and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling”, any new structure will soon prove ineffective” (EG §26). A considerable number of problems in the Church could be linked to some of the structures that are in place that

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* – *On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (24 November 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed 20 December 2023). Hereafter EG in text.

constantly alienate people. According to the Pope, we have to face this rather uncomfortable truth: "We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lacks a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places, an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization" (EG §63). The Pope cautions that the Church should be bold to avoid getting trapped within the structures that no longer serve the evangelizing mission (EG §49). Added to this is the avoidance of 'new structures of welcoming' that care little about the spiritual concerns of believers in favor of public affirmation of openness and inclusivity. This explains why communal discernment that is rooted in the Gospels and the Tradition is very critical in living out synodality.

Communal discernment leads, and demands, pastoral conversation, which for Pope Francis begins with the papacy, and serves to dissipate the atmosphere of suspicion and doubts in the Church. Pope Francis' embrace of "a wider more collaborative and participatory understanding of the church and forms of authority is itself a further break with his immediate predecessors,"⁴ and this is notwithstanding a similar invitation that was offered by Pope John-Paul II in *Ut unum sint* (1995). Participation and communion are at the center of synodality as measures that promote greater responsibility and

⁴ Gerard Mannion, "Francis' Ecclesiological Revolution: A New Way of Being Church, a New Way of being Pope," 93-122, in Gerard Mannion, ed., *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 122.

transparency. This implies embracing differences and diversities across levels of ministry in the Church—clergy, religious, lay, and the multiple variations within each of these categories. A deep appreciation of the diversity in the Church, and by extension the society is one way of maintaining unity and communion amid disagreements and conflicts (EG §228). Diversity is never a threat to ecclesial unity, since the Holy Spirit who is the principle of communion and "a multifaceted and inviting harmony" is at once the one who through diverse gifts (*charisma*) creates "a unity which is never uniformity" (EG §117). The authenticity of the charism is proven by ecclesial communion, particularly when it is difficult to maintain it (EG §130). In practice, this means that the dignity of each person (in his or her diversity) is put before the possible problems that might arise during common participation or communion-building. The point is that conflict must not be avoided or simply glossed over. There must be courage to address it without destroying unity. By implication within the call to synodal praxis at the level of the parish or diocese, attention must be paid to the universal synodality of the Church. This explains the importance of the parish community and the bishop in fostering real communion and participation in the Church (EG §§28, 31).

Communion and participation also presuppose the act of discernment which is at the heart of pastoral discernment – where believers walk together under the leadership of the bishops in the "task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities" (EG §33). This task of discernment in the service of evangelization is not reserved for people in the parish community or the particular churches (EG §30). It equally involves everyone including theologians some of whom are often detached from real pastoral life or engagement in the

lived experience of “the Church’s saving mission” (EG §133). Discernment operates in a way that respects the shifts in ecclesial structure that Pope Francis alludes to. Hence, he calls for a form of healthy “decentralization” (EG §16) that makes for the principle of subsidiarity in the governance of the Church, particularly in relation to the pope and the local bishops. Perhaps what is also insightful in *Evangelii gaudium* is an understanding of what discernment does: “In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood, and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as a means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them. Such a re-examination does not imply outrightly doing away with them in areas where they still serve communion. At the same time, the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God 'are very few'. Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation 'so as not to burden the lives of the faithful' and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas 'God's mercy has willed that we should be free'. This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. It ought to be one of the criteria to be taken into account in considering a reform of the Church and her preaching which would enable it to reach everyone.” (EG §43) This rather long quote also speaks to the question of contemporary customs that are not connected to the heart of the Gospel and that must not be taken on as part of ecclesial life. Such customs must remain within the

precinct of pastoral solicitude as the Gospel challenges the entire Church to unending conversion. But does this imply an ‘easy’ or perhaps a ‘crossless’ form of Christianity? Not at all, since Christianity takes upon itself the radicality of witnessing to God’s love even to the point of martyrdom. Discernment involves sorting out these issues both in the past and in the present.

In the process of discernment, listening takes place across the board—listening to God and listening to one another. According to Pope Francis: “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives” (EG §171). In the praxis of listening in the Church, we come to a greater appreciation of our faith and a clear understanding of what it means to be a community of believers, through the difficulties, challenges, and joys. Listening involves patience, and the resolution not to take the easy path of non-engagement, the result of which is an artificial community that is only sustained by individualistic attraction to the divine. In the process of listening, we also experience the fluidity and dynamicity of the hierarchical pyramid in the Church, whereby the inversion of the hierarchical pyramid happens now and again without any feeling of contradiction. The acceptance that the pyramid is at once reversed and unreversed is a better way of understanding the nature of communion and the variety of gifts that sustain it, rather than the options of either an *unreversed pyramid*

that quickly slips into clericalism and authoritarianism or the *reversed pyramid* that is prone to anti-clericalism and confusion. To illustrate, the priest cannot preside over the Eucharist and still be on the pew at the same time, just as he is conscious that without the people there is no parish, and in fact, his ministry would cease to exist. The baseline of synodality presented by Pope Francis already points to problems in the Church and the tensions that they generate. In addressing these challenges, one must confront the continued feeling of exclusion in all its manifestations, including the many young people who often perceive themselves as standing at the margins of synodal conversations and praxis.

Young people, and the crisis of belonging and non-belonging

In their disposition toward the Church, most young people feel that they exist only at the margins of ecclesiality. Except in instances where young people reach out for participation in the Church, often through responding to priestly or religious vocation, there is an impression that not enough is done to bring them to the center. Of course, for most young people in the Church today the pathway of belongingness to the Church is marked by spirituality, which sometimes can be fluid. The contrast between the fluidity of spiritual expressions and the stability that is offered by ecclesial belonging is captured in Robert Wuthnow's categorization of young people into "dwellers" and "seekers". Wuthnow's classification is based on his conviction that people's understanding of the sacred reveals a shift from the "traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places" to "a new spirituality of seeking."⁵ According to him, dwellers

⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

represent a spirituality that is marked by “habitation,” and seekers by “negotiation.” Spirituality in this case is understood as consisting of “all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality.”⁶ For dwellers, the emphasis on habitation is based on the understanding of God as occupying “a definite place in the universe” while at once creating “a sacred space in which humans too can dwell.”⁷ Beyond the categorization, one could consider young people in the Church as representing, through their spiritual disposition, an “integrated seeker–dweller/ negotiation–habitation model that gives a sense of stability in fluidity.”⁸ Theologically, the integrated model is grounded in the paradigm of the pilgrim Church, which is on the way (*synodoi*) and at the same time a ‘community of disciples’⁹ (*koinonia*), a home¹⁰ (*oikos*). That means that young people's commitment to the Church is from a place of deep spiritual connection rather than in the very definitions and boundaries of doctrines. This could either mean that they are not invested in the details of the Synod on Synodality except for the spiritual vibrancy that they expect in parishes and communities, or they are not given enough space for their voice to be heard in the Church. The Synthesis of the First Session

⁶ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, viii.

⁷ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 3.

⁸ Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, “Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 14, no.1 (2021): 86-103; 102.

⁹ This is one of the five models of the Church by the American theologian, Avery Dulles.

¹⁰ Pope Francis uses the model of ‘home’ to describe the church in one of his daily homilies. See Elise Harries, “Pope: The Church is Not a Rental House, but a Home,” Catholic News Agency (5 June 2014), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/29790/pope-the-church-is-not-a-rental-house-but-a-home> (accessed 27 December 2023).

indicates that the experience of a relationality in which the Church becomes truly God's home and family points to "the Church that young people first declared they desired in 2018 on the occasion of the Synod of Youth" (1.b), and this confirms "the need for a preferential option for young people" (16.e).

In fact, the Frascati document of the continental phase of the synod, as well as the Synthesis of the First Session, confirms that: "There is universal concern regarding the meager presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church."¹¹ The document also mentions the problem of passivity among the laity.¹² For many of these young people, there is some sort of indifference to issues concerning the politics of power distribution and the often undefined agenda of inclusiveness which focuses mostly on structures rather than the spiritual animation of the People of God. One wonders if this explains why traditional Catholicism with its emphasis on spirituality seems to attract most young people, irrespective of whatever critique one may have of it. This is something to ponder on. Where traditionalism is rooted in rigid historical consciousness, one might argue that a truly synodal Church is not only grounded in history but primarily rooted in God, and this makes humility an indispensable attribute she must possess. And it is "only this attitude of humility, of self-decentralization, can make it possible to abandon particular interests to truly seek the good of the Church in the service of the universal

¹¹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent" (1s 54:2): *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2022), §35; Synthesis of the First Session, §16.k.

¹² Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §19.

common good.”¹³ Of course, this might prove difficult for many in the Church, many of whom were formed over the years in a non-flexible way of relating to the world. There is, therefore, the need to be patient with everyone while paying attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing with both the old and the young in the Church.

In paying special attention to the bearers of the complexities of today, synodality further uncovers how the young people’s participation, questions, and concerns can contribute to the healing, renewal, and reform of the Church. The pope remarks that “all young people who love Jesus Christ and his Church...can be a source of great healing if they employ their great capacity to bring about renewal, to urge and demand consistent witness, to keep dreaming and coming up with new ideas” (*Christus vivit* §101).¹⁴ This is exactly the case. Several living parish communities and campus ministries run on the creative energy of young people who display profound love for Christ and the Church and are committed to making the world better. These young people take advantage of synodal spaces in their Christian communities to witness the Gospel, particularly through their identity as ‘digital natives’ (The Synthesis 17.a). The Synthesis underscores that the Church’s evangelization of the digital culture can come through young people who possess “profound and direct experience of it” and so are “best suited” for this mission (17.d). Within such digital synodal spaces, a new ecclesiology emerges in which leadership is dispersed –

¹³ Nathalie Becquart, “The Synod of Young People, a Laboratory of Synodality,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no.4 (2021): 411-426; 416.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (25 March 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (accessed 23 December 2023). Hereafter CV.

most times lay-led but without any confusion about the role of the ordained. A typical example is the Daily Rosary X (Twitter) Space that is hosted by Olusola Olabode, and assisted by Valentine Patrick Tom, both young lay Nigerian Catholics. The Rosary Space has remained consistent since it was first hosted in January 2022, with a daily average of 1000 participants, most of whom are young people from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and other parts of the world. Many young priests also join the Space and are given the duty to share a short reflection and to give the final blessing. Sometimes the reflection is also assigned to female religious or anyone in the absence of any priest or religious. For many of these young people, the Space has become an opportunity to rekindle their Catholic faith, build communion, and enjoy a safe space from whatever discomfort they may have experienced in the parish communities. In most cases, it also provides them with the opportunity to better relate with and to appreciate deeply their local parishes. There is yet another model of digital synodal space in the work of the FAITHCHAT Platform that was founded by the celebrity TikTok Nigerian-British priest, James Anyaegbu, who is a missionary in the little Scottish village, called Beaulieu. What began as a fun, youth-friendly means of evangelization during the COVID lockdown in 2020 has turned into a digital Catholic community with members spread across the world. The group hosts daily prayers, faith conversations, catechesis, and monthly Eucharistic adoration on their Instagram handle. Members also organize charity events across the world, so far in Nigeria, Scotland, Kenya, Ghana, Mozambique, and the United States. Like the more global youth-populated movements, like Taizè and Nightfever, these emerging digital synodal spaces have remained unrelenting in animating the Church through their presence, prayers, and caritative missions. They testify indeed that “being

young is not only about pursuing fleeting pleasures and superficial achievements” (CV §108) but also a search for meaning that can only be satisfied by a living faith in God. Perhaps how committed young people practice their faith could serve as a model for a faith praxis that flows from a synodal interiority.

On the ranks of skeptics and critics

If the commitment of most young people borders on the spirituality that allows them to navigate reality within the Church that is welcoming, we still must confront the stronger reactions that emerge from the ranks of those who strongly agree or disagree with the process, agenda, and direction of the Synod on Synodality. Despite the theological quality of synodality in its invitation to a radical shift in the self-understanding of the Church through a co-responsible process of discernment, one must contend with the fact that “such a process of discernment is not free from dispute.” Judith Gruber puts it more poignantly that synodal ecclesiology “makes space for disagreement and conflict in the theological conception of the church” to the point of provoking “a theology of conflict and contestation.”¹⁵ Apart from presuming that the call for a synodal Church necessarily involves conflict and contestation, there is a need to interrogate the possible source(s) of the conflicts. Does conflict emerge from merely 'walking together' or from the determination of the destination of the journey? If the nature of the Church as an assembly of God's people is the journey of all these same people towards salvation, what then is that *extra* of synodality that differentiates it from what

¹⁵ Judith Gruber, “Consensus or Dissensus? Exploring the Theological Role of Conflict in a Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 43, no.3 (2020): 239-259; 242.

has always been the case? Is synodality really about the faith journey of the faithful in the Church or essentially a ‘political’ process of re-ordering the decision-making structures of the Church? Where the latter is the case, then it might be a bit problematic to highlight the literal meaning of synodality over and above the real intentions behind it. Notwithstanding the theological justifications that are always projected in defense of synodality, a focus on the issues that create conflict and tension in the Church might be a first step towards identifying the source(s) of the conflicts. But where the impression is given that the Synod is aimed at fostering a more discerning, listening, and co-responsible ecclesia,¹⁶ then the projection of a set of agenda becomes very defeating, and indeed, capable of creating more confusion among the faithful. Yet tensions and conflicts are inevitable since the synodal acts of ‘listening’ and ‘discernment’ must answer the questions of ‘what’ and ‘why’.

Put interrogatively: What are the reasons for which the Church should adopt a more listening and co-responsible habitus? Why is it important that the Church becomes a listening and co-responsible body? The answer could be found in the long list of crises and tensions that have shaken the Church in recent times, most of which constitute obstacles to the synodal process. One of these is “the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy or by people holding ecclesial office: first and foremost, abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, but also abuse of other kinds (spiritual, sexual, economic, of authority, of conscience).”¹⁷ There is also the matter of those who “feel a tension between belonging to the Church and their loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single

¹⁶ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2021), §1.3.

¹⁷ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, “*Enlarge the space of your tent*”, §20.

parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people, etc."¹⁸ Another problem emerges from the conditions of those at the periphery, namely "the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and sexuality."¹⁹ These areas of crises and tensions indeed call for a more listening Church and pastoral conversion. These also require a Church that allows itself to be challenged by the Gospel in different ways through a commitment to the good and conversion from sin. If the mission of salvation of the soul (*salus animarum*) is to be at the center of the Church, then there must be a serious desire to reject sin despite the acknowledgment of our sinfulness. Walking together on the way is also a metaphor for conversion and repentance, of the arduous but grace-filled movement toward the holiness of all the faithful.

Speaking of conversion invokes a moral implication that is often lost in the debate regarding inclusion and exclusion. The eschatological template of Matthew 25 is predicated on this moral paradigm. Sometimes where the moral boundaries are rendered unclear skepticism becomes the safe space for most believers. In fact, in his *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, Benedict XVI validates skepticism as the natural response when ecclesial memory is subjected to confusing

¹⁸ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §39.

¹⁹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §40.

interpretations. An instance is where the basic biblical understanding of marriage is nuanced with a fluid interpretation of love and/or of blessing, like in the case of the controversial 2023 Declaration by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia supplicans*.²⁰ Concerning the Synod on Synodality, signals of unclear interpretations of ecclesial norms and memory have led to a form of meta-interrogation, which does not make the concerns of skeptics and critics easily dismissible. It is the question of who is listening. Who is discerning? Who is being listened to, and who is being ignored? What is the scope of the listening process of the Synod? In exploring the questions, I shall appeal to the voices in the digital space, which are often ignored. As far as I know, there seems to be no feedback collation mechanism from social media space despite the use of the same space by the secretariat of the Synod in promoting synodality.

In one of its communications on social media, precisely on Instagram, sometime in 2022, the Secretariat for the Synod on Synodality posted on its social media handle a picture that celebrates the LGBTQ community and female priests as the ‘future’ of the Church. This is wrongheaded and may be interpreted by some as already presenting a predetermined outcome of a process that is dedicated to conversation and listening. In a synodal process, it is counterproductive to work from an answer to the questions. Most comments under the post show a level of confusion, distress, and strong disagreement. The lack of any response to the series of complaints raises the question of the synodality value of social media. Social media is not just a space for enter-

²⁰ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans, Declaration on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings* (18 December 2023), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dof_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html (accessed 27 December 2023).

tainment but also a place of knowledge sharing, information, and social engagement, a synodal space for listening and discernment for believers, as acknowledged in “The Church Listens to You” Project, the ‘Digital Synod’ initiative of young Catholic ‘digital evangelists’ (The Synthesis 17.e).²¹ Most posts on social media from corporate institutions are often taken as ‘ideological kites’ flown to evaluate public reactions and measure the degree of reception or rejection of a particular idea. This is normally the case where there is no dialogue or consensus on any idea that is projected to the public sphere. In the context of the examples above, one wonders if the Synod Secretariat was engaging in ideological kite-flying. Or is the Synod Secretariat convinced *a priori* that the images represent the synodal direction of the Church? The fact is that even where the action is motivated by the need for inclusion, the approach could end up being counterproductive.

On the Facebook page of the Synod, there were also other additional concerns about the images used by the secretariat which do not measure up to the artistic, theological, and biblical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. For many of the respondents, this is a classical betrayal of what the Church has always represented. The concern is whether non-doctrinal issues of ecclesial heritage, such as art, matter in all cases. Certainly, a deviation from the symbolic markers of communal identity could be considered offensive by most members. A comment from Matheus Rodrigues of the Archdiocese of Montes Claros reads: “It’s hard to think that we are working in our dioceses trying to save the synod purpose from the ideological influence, trying to show people that

²¹ José Manuel De Urquidi Gonzalez and Xiskya Lucia Valladares Paguaga, Testimony of the Digital Mission, General Congregation 8-13 October 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/13/231013c0.html> (27 December 2023).

we can make it good, without these (sic) kind of ideology, and now we are seeing that we do not have even the support of the Vatican. How can the Catholic Church go with these ideological ideas? Kyrie Eleison!” A similar comment was made by one Luciane Robeiro Capundag, a young lady from New Zealand, and a host of others. We can easily dismiss these comments either on the grounds of pedestrianism, the likelihood of trollism or for the fact that the Church should not be swayed by social media popularity, yet to ignore these is to contradict the synodal principle of listening. Most comments were negative, and a simple examination shows that most of these are coming from Catholics, when put together with the fact that attendance of synodal meetings is largely based on selective representation, then it would be wise to listen more broadly to the Catholic sidelines. More still, a compelling argument would be that synodality is not to be presented as some sort of liberal agenda that ridicules most elements of ecclesial tradition that do not injure communion in any way, neither should it mirror fundamentalist, conservative posturing of gatekeeping that seek to determine the valid actions of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

It has already been made clear that, unlike the other synods that have been enjoyed exclusively by the bishops, the Synod on Synodality “consults the entire people of God: lay and ordained, religious and nonreligious, Catholic and beyond.”²² In doing so, we must be mindful that the actions that ought to follow the consultation or discernment process of any category of the people of God must be differentiated properly. Consulting the 'non-religious people of God' is different from consulting the 'Catholic people of God', with differing outcomes, responses, and actions. Well, some may argue that the

²² Michael J. Sanem, *Your Church Wants to Hear from You: What Is the Synod on Synodality?* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2022), 6.

objective is not to be defined in terms of actions that ought to follow at the end and that the aim of the Synod is essentially captured in the phrase "the journey is the destination". Explaining, Michael Sanem opines that "This pilot experience makes it possible to grow in synodality through synodality. By engaging in this process, we hope to become a church that fosters dialogue and listening among all people, especially the poor and vulnerable."²³ The point is to recognize the gradations of listening and to prioritize the act of listening within the Church since many who are inside the Church already consider themselves as being on the sidelines. Failure on this path is a recipe to further polarization and weakening of ecclesial communion.

Ideological polarizations, pseudo-propheticism and ecclesial critics

The desire to have a synodal Church is linked to a praxis in ecclesial Tradition that is captured in the ancient Roman legal principle, *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*, "what affects everyone ought to be discussed and decided by everyone." Richard Gaillardetz comments that this synodal principle "challenges the clerical paternalism that informs Church governance at every level. A clerical paternalism is unlikely to yield to the demands of this principle without a thorough reconsideration of the bishop's structural relationship to his flock."²⁴ While highly commendable, the problem with the principle is the tendency to democratize matters of faith thereby subjecting them to popularity contests. Given the radicality of the Christian message, opinions that are contrary to the

²³ Sanem, *Your Church Wants to Hear from You*, 9.

²⁴ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order," *Concilium* 2 (2021): 98-108; 104.

Gospel might be more attractive to the whole range of people who are invited to speak and be listened to. While these contra-evangelical opinions might tell us something about the 'signs of the times', they necessarily do not require an abandonment of the Gospel in a manner that fails to inspire conversion and holiness. Attempts to redefine marriage and even reformulate the Lord's Prayer within Anglicanism are very sad examples. Also, despite its positives, the downsides of the German *Synodale Weg* constitute a Catholic example of what happens when there are no caveats or even when the red lines are intentionally crossed. It is understandable for some to argue against caveats when it comes to synodality, but the Church is not built on nothing. In his letter to the German bishops, Pope Francis reaffirms this under two points. First, he insists that "the synodal path of personal and ecclesial renewal must be linked to the Church's central task of evangelization and be guided by the Holy Spirit." Second, the pope states "any process of synodal renewal must guard against the twin dangers of polarization and fragmentation by means of a strong *sensus ecclesiae* and connectedness to the universal Church."²⁵ To ignore these principles, including a rightly ordered *sensus fidei*, is to further subject the Church to ideological twists and turns. In other words, every synodal conversation should lead to a true synodal conversion.

In fact, in an article in *La Croix*, Massimo Faggioli recognizes a possible ecclesiological risk that emerges from a conversation on synodality that lacks the required synodal conversion. According to him, the synodality fever of today necessarily needs "an unwritten wisdom for a synodal conversion that has to face a variety of

²⁵ Declan Marmion, "A Church that Listens': Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," *New Blackfriars* 102, no.1100 (2021): 442-458; 454.

obstacles.”²⁶ He outlines and explains these obstacles as including the following: First is the challenge of hyper-polarization, which requires that the Synod in its communication and listening process dismantles the “partisan way of understanding synodality.” Second is the danger of perceiving synodality as another form of “bureaucratic ecclesiastical apparatus” by skeptics. The fact is that if there are no palpable spiritual changes arising from this Synod, then skeptics who consider it as all about “paperwork Church” as Faggioli puts it must have been vindicated. Third is the lack of patience fueled by “an unreasonable desire for the spectacular,” and an exaggerated claim to a comprehensive knowledge of how to ‘fix’ the Church. This may arise both from the camp of passionate proponents and those who loudly and dramatically dismiss the synod as “the theological *tragedy* of modern Catholicism”, that is, Faggioli explains “the impossibility of Church reform, of the inevitable and inescapable fate of decline.” Fourth is the danger of reducing synodality to structures, particularly in creating new ones where the existing ones are not even functioning at all. Of course, it is not simply a matter of reviving old ones but of living them differently in the light of today’s ecclesial challenges. Fifth is the desire “to decide everything all at once” which is linked to the third obstacle of impatience. Here, Faggioli appears to have put a finger on several problematic elements in the synodal conversation, which in themselves are also crisis-revealing ideological wings that operate both in the society and in the Church.

²⁶ Massimo Faggioli, “All Roads Lead to ... the Synod in Rome: A Bit of Synodal Wisdom,” *La Croix: Signs of the Times* (9 March 2023), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/all-roads-lead-to-the-synod-in-rome-a-bit-of-synodal-wisdom/17430> (accessed 28 December 2023).

In a celebrated 'last lecture' on 23 September 2022, Gaillardetz, as the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College, remarks that we are confronted by what seems to be a contemporary crisis in ecclesial life. This crisis is defined by the ideological polarization that lays claim to being prophetic while brandishing a critique of the Church. For Gaillardetz, this crisis is a result of "our failure to maintain a reflective equilibrium." According to him, "We are becoming divided into two camps, those who embrace the tradition, whole cloth, as a reality that stands beyond critique, and those whose sweeping denunciations leave us only a few salvageable fragments of a largely failed tradition."²⁷ This is evident in many instances of Church life. In the reaction to papal legislation on the old Latin rite, in the German *Synodale Weg* project, and in the ongoing Synod on Synodality there is little evidence of maintaining equilibrium and 'living in the tension'. The National Report of the US dioceses on the Synod on Synodality, involving 700,000 participants, 30,000 opportunities, and 22,000 reports, acknowledges the level of division in the Church even within the liturgy and the hierarchy. The Report appreciates "a tension between how to walk with people while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church."²⁸

The failure to wrestle with this tension breeds a surge in the number of ideological analysts, theologians, and commentators that promote what Gaillardetz called a

²⁷ Joshua J. McElwee, "Theologian Gaillardetz warns Against Over-critique of Church in 'Last Lecture'," *National Catholic Reporter* (28 September 2022), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theologian-gaillardetz-warns-against-over-critique-church-last-lecture> (accessed 27 December 2023).

²⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2022), 7.

“pseudo-propheticism” given their singular wish to critique the Church at every turn. Often for those who cannot easily have their way then either the Pope or Rome is made the scapegoat to the cheers and applause of those who belong to the ideological camp. For instance, for some in the *Synodale Weg*, it is the German Church *versus* the Vatican, rather than a particular Church *versus* the universal Church. Gaillardetz observes that “among more progressive, reformist Catholics, there is a temptation to applaud any and all criticisms leveled at church authorities, church structures or the received tradition, regardless of the objective merits of the critique itself.”²⁹ The same goes to the so-called traditionalist Catholics some of who develop a rather toxic attitude towards the Church as she reaches out to the world out there. In fact, for most of them, the Second Vatican Council ought not to have happened.

To live in the tension is to fully acknowledge the ecclesial heritage of the *living* Tradition together with the *immutability* of the Truth of Divine Revelation. Both must be held together in a contemplative disposition of a Church that prays and listens. On 26 August 2022, during a press conference to inaugurate the continental phase of the Synod on Synodality, the Luxembourg Cardinal, Jean-Claude Hollerich who also doubles as the Relator General of the Synod captures an understanding of the tension by underscoring his conviction that the synodal process is not about changing doctrine but to listen to the people of God and develop “a change of attitude” that would make the Church a home for everyone. The Cardinal dismisses any fear that the Synod might be hijacked, saying: “I’m not afraid, because I believe in God, prayer, meditation, and listening to people gives me hope and strength. You have

²⁹ McElwee, “Theologian Gaillardetz warns Against Over-critique of Church.”

to walk and when you walk in the desert like in the Book of Exodus, there are some temptations, but with the help of God, we can pass through these temptations.”³⁰ Such uncommon witness to the centrality of faith, prayer, and meditation are critical in the synodal process.

Conclusion

An account of those who might be indifferent, skeptical, or confused about the Synod on Synodality is an invitation to caution on the process of synodality. If the synodal process does not lead the Church to greater fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, then it will only be remembered as an exercise in which ideology triumphed over faith. To safeguard ecclesial fidelity, it is necessary to be completely open to the Holy Spirit and be committed to personal and ecclesial conversion. Otherwise, we face a great ecclesiological risk that further deepens the crisis in the Church instead of fostering healing and communion. While it is expected that certain things will change in the Church following the Synod on Synodality, we must live with the fact that some decisions will take a long time to mature, and there are even things that will remain the way they have always been. It is not a matter of ‘do or die’. If the outcome of the Synod heads towards a direction of hyper-polarization, then no one knows where it will lead the Church in the future. One thing is however clear, this is exactly the path that the Synod on Synodality should avoid.

³⁰ Hannah Brockhaus, “Synodality Process Reaches the Continental Stage,” *African Synodality Newsletter* Iss.4 (2022): 2.

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***Sambahayan ng Diyos* and the Four Creedal Attributes**

Levy Lara Lanaria

Abstract: The local concept of *sambahayan* will be examined and developed for its “appropriateness” to convey the Christian ecclesia as *sambahayan ng Diyos* (family household of God). This locally-generated understanding will also serve as a model for explaining the nature of the Christian ecclesia itself. Thus, this adoption of the local category of *sambahayan* serves to encapsulate and contextualize the Catholic Church's four creedal attributes of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Without this move of contextualization-appropriation, the creedal attributes lack moorings and relevance in Filipino culture and society.

Keywords: *Sambahayan ng Diyos* • Household of God • Creedal Attributes • Unity • Holiness • Catholicity • Apostolicity

Introduction

An ecclesiological model that resonates with the family-oriented Filipino culture-bearers is the Church as the Family of God.¹ The model is biblically grounded, affirmed by Vatican II, and endorsed by post-Vatican II

¹ The Philippine social organization is essentially familial (F. Landa Jocano, *Filipino Social Organization: Traditional Kinship and Family Organization*. Anthropology of the Filipino People III (Metro Manila: PUNLAD Research House, 1998), 62; Francis Gustilo, “Towards the Inculturation of the Salesian Family Spirit in the Filipino Context” (Ph.D. diss., Rome 1989), 65. A local sociologist identifies the Filipino family with “familism.” He defines the term as “a sociological phenomenon in which the extended family is the most central and dominant institution in the life of all individuals” (Luis Q. Lacar, “Familism Among Muslims and Christians in the Philippines,” *Philippine Studies* 43 (1995): 42, 43).

documents.² It cuts across Catholic cultural settings as it is “understandable to laity...has a lay dynamic in it...calls for spirituality relevant to lay life...portrays sufficiently the life and mission of laity...(and) integrates the role of laity into the whole life of the Church.”³ In the survey of biblical images that Vatican II presented in *Lumen gentium*, Aloys Grillmeier considers the image ‘family of God’...as “the most expressive” as it derives “from the highest forms of human fellowship and society.”⁴ The familial model has a symbolic character potent enough to evoke attitudes and courses of action while possessing clarity toward a deeper reflective understanding of the Church. It is something that is “not

² See Herman Hendrickx, *The Household of God* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology/Claretian Publications, 1992); *Lumen gentium* 11. Notable is the formal adoption of the *Church as Family of God* model by the African bishops for the African Church in 1994 (see Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Leadership and Ministry in the Church-as-Family,” https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1541&context=theo_fac, [accessed December 18, 2023]). Of more recent memory is the Eighth Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC VIII) held on August 17-23, 2004 at the Daejeon Catholic University & St. J. Hasang Education Center, Daejeon, Korea. The assembly produced a document entitled *The Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life*. See also John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (1981); *Acts of the International Theological-Pastoral Congress, The Christian Family: Good News for the Third Millennium* (Fourth World Meeting of Families, Manila, January 22-24, 2003).

³ Leonard Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church: Theology & Spirituality* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, 1984), 64.

⁴ Aloys Grillmeier, “The Mystery of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*. Vol. I, gen. ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 143.

abstract...but rather challenges all laity to appreciate that their everyday experience, knowledge, and skills qualify them to be the family of the Church.”⁵ Also, the model finds support in official Catholic Church documents in the country. They describe the Christian family as “the basic unit of Christian life,” “subject and object of evangelization,” “the primary community of Christ’s disciples,” “the church of the home,” or “the church in the home,” and “agent of renewal.”⁶

The term ‘family’ is usually translated both in written and oral communications into “pamilya” which is a transliteration of the Spanish *familia*. A vernacular rendition is *sambahayan*, a concept that is neither discrete nor separable from the family. Local dictionaries not only render it in English as “household” but also as “whole family.”⁷ The root word of *sambahayan* is *bahay* (house; home). When the root word *bahay* is modified by the affixes *sam-* and *-an*, the resulting composite term *sambahayan* refers now to *isang buong kabahayan* (one entire household to include all the members of the family living under one roof). The prefix *sam-* is a shortened form of *isa* (one). A synonymous word is

⁵ Leonard Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church*, xii.

⁶ See Arturo M. Bastes, “Focus is on the Family for National Bible Week Celebration,” in *The CBCP Monitor* VI, no. 1 (January 13, 2002): 6; *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1992) #48; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Save the Family and Live*, in *Pastoral Letters 1945-1995*, comp. and ed. Pedro C. Quitorio III (Manila: CBCP; printed by Peimon Press, Metro Manila, 1996), 801. See also Chapter Three (on the ecclesia as God’s household) of Wes Howard-Brook, *The Church Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

⁷ See Leo James English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, s.v. “sambahayan.”

magkakasambahay whose rootword is likewise *bahay*.⁸ The prefix *magkakasam-* is a compound of *magkaka-* which denotes relationships and *sam-* (again referring to “one”). *Magkakasambahay*, thus, literally means “fellows living together in the same house,” which is what *sambahayan* means as well. Persons belonging to the same household, particularly the non-kin, are simply called *kasambahay*. The word is a combination of *kasama* (companion) shortened and *bahay* (house). In rural communities a non-kin farmhand or house-help living with a family until old age is virtually treated as a “real” member of the unit.⁹ In the country, *kasambahay* has assumed a technical usage that refers to a house-help or domestic helper.

In this paper, I will use the word *sambahayan* as it embraces everyone in the household: parents/guardians, children, and *mga kasambahay*. Beyond the household is the extended orientation of the traditional Filipino family.

This adoption of the local category of *sambahayan* will serve to encapsulate and contextualize the Catholic Church's four creedal attributes of unity, holiness,

⁸ F. Landa Jocano, *Filipino Social Organization: Traditional Kinship and Family Organization* (Anthropology of the Filipino People III. Metro Manila: PUNLAD Research House, 1998), 61.

⁹ Paz Mendez and F. Landa Jocano, *The Filipino Family in its Rural and Urban Orientation: Two Case Studies* (Manila: Research and Development Center, Centro Escolar University, 1974), 43; Jocano, *Filipino Social Organization*, 72. A locally-based non-governmental organization in partnership with the International Labor Organization campaigned for the use of the term *kasambahay* to refer to house helpers instead of the pejorative-sounding *katulong* or *alalay* that casts them as of lower status. See Susan V. Ople, “Kasambahay,” *Philippine Panorama Sunday* (October 16, 2005): 20.

catholicity, and apostolicity. Without this move of contextualization-appropriation, the creedal attributes lack moorings and relevance in Filipino culture and society.

Creedal Attributes

The *sambahayan ng Diyos* (family household of God) as an ecclesiological model appropriated in the Filipino cultural context puts the family, in line with the thinking of the Asian bishops, as the most basic expression of ecclesial reality.¹⁰ As such the church in/of the home is validated by its ecclesial elements that constitute its church-ness. The set of creedal attributes, a veritable heritage of the Church's venerable 2,000-year ecclesial history, can be considered as authentication of the domestic church's fidelity to the spirit of the Gospel message. These attributes are assumed to have arisen out of the data of New Testament revelation and have become consistent themes in the ecclesiological discourse and reflections in and about the Church.¹¹

The creedal attributes called unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Catholic Church

¹⁰ "The family is the . . . fundamental ecclesial community, the Church that is the home" (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Eighth Assembly, *The Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life* (Daejeon, Korea, 2004), n. 15). Centuries earlier, the Protestant reformer Luther considered the house as "actually a school and a church, and the head of the household is a bishop and priest in his house" (quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Family Worship: In the Bible, In History, and In your Home* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 30).

¹¹ See for example Lode Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990) where the author illustrates different ways of interpreting the creedal attributes according to how one views the Church.

occupy a prominent and permanent place in ecclesiological tradition. They originally belonged to the corpus of theological tradition which Lode Wostyn prefers to call “truth of Christianity.”¹² These attributes are referred to officially as ‘creedal’ because they form part of the Apostles’ Creed formulated in the Council of Nicaea-Constantinople and reaffirmed at Ephesus and Chalcedon: “We believe . . . (in) the *one, holy, catholic*, and *apostolic* Church [εἰς μίαν, ἁγίαν, καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν].”¹³ They were again taken up in Vatican II which asserts that in particular churches “Christ is present, by whose power the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church is gathered together.”¹⁴

Hans Küng, preferring to use the more theologically oriented “dimensions”¹⁵ to refer to them affirms the importance of the signs but not in terms of their formal presence. The essential thing is their “living realization in the life of the Church” that is rooted in their fidelity to the New Testament message.¹⁶ The Church can proclaim itself one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in a meaningful and convincing fashion when the proclamation is done in the spirit of the Gospel. Moreover, they are not simply possessions of the Church but are divinely granted gifts. The signs or dimensions are “characteristics which the Church receives from the activity of Christ in the Spirit

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Hans Küng, *The Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 263.

¹⁴ *Lumen gentium* 26.

¹⁵ He argues in favor of his preference that theologically the creedal attributes do not originate from and are not owned by the Church. They are dimensions precisely because they come from “the activity of Christ in the Spirit and as such they become signs of the true Church through faith, hope, and action” (Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology*, 80-81).

¹⁶ Küng, *The Church*, 268.

and as such they become signs of the true Church through faith, hope, and action.”¹⁷

Apropos the question of the ecclesial signs is the Gospel saying of Jesus “By their fruits you shall know them” (Mt. 7:16). In a manner of speaking, the fruits are authentications of the real nature and the true state of health of the true Church. The ‘truth’ I have in mind is not ‘truth’ that is circumscribed by fixed formulae, which can be enslaving, burdensome, or stifling. Truth, in the historical and implicitly practical/intuitive sense of the word, is more congenial to orthopraxis, to relationships operating at different levels founded on the Trinitarian love (1 John 3:18). With nothing against which to validate the theological truthfulness of the Church, the Church is simply reduced to an abstract mystical or transcendent reality that is away or separate from immanent expressions that constitute the ecclesial realities. These expressions by their very nature can make sense when verified in particular realities where the Church exists.

The Creedal Attributes Appropriated in the Domestic Church

If one employs a model to explain or understand the nature/meaning of the church, the model's features will also have its way of explaining or “hanging together” the creedal attributes or truths about Christianity. If one privileges the Institutional model, or the Dynamic-Historical model, or the Church of the Poor model, there will be corresponding nuances, even substantive differences, in the appropriation or contextualization of the creedal attributes.

The following is an illustration of how the truth of Christianity can be understood and articulated according

¹⁷ Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology*, 81.

to a particular ecclesiological model.¹⁸ This is not an exhaustive presentation but may give a fair idea about how different models may pull down toward their specificities which are otherwise generalized and abstract concepts.

Church models	One	Holy	Catholic	Apostolic
Church as Institution Model	United in doctrine, in worship, and in government (under the papal authority)	Attainable through the seven sacraments, religious vows, and priestly celibacy, under the moral guidance of the infallible church magisterium	Spatial, statistical, and geographical with the same creed, the same worship, the same canon law	Linear 'apostolic succession': direct and uninterrupted transmission of the apostolic office from Peter to his subsequent successors represented by the bishops and priests with the Pope as the supreme visible head

¹⁸ For the elaboration on the Church as Institution Model, see Louis Laravoire Morrow, *Our Catholic Faith: A Manual of Religion* (Manila: Catholic Trade, 1977); on the Historical Model, see Lode Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology: Church and Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990); and on the Church from the Poor, see Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985); on the Church of the Poor idea, see Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," in Shaji George Kochuthara, ed, *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, Vol. II, 308-326 (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2015); reprinted in *MST Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 33-62.

Church models	One	Holy	Catholic	Apostolic
Dynamic-Historical	Unity of the local church and the universal church ultimately founded on the unity of the Triune God	Linked to the community of sinners sanctified by God and set apart for His service; responding and being faithful to God's initiative and election by being committed to peace and justice in solidarity with the poor	Catholicity is a gift in and through Christ; bring the good news to all strata of humanity and transforming it from within and making it new; spreading God's inclusive love	Apostolic witnessing and ministry entrusted to the entire Church
Church of the Poor	Fellowship with a liberating God who expects people to work together in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized and who are at the same time recognized as agents of their own destiny	Being set apart by the empowering grace of the Spirit of Jesus not for personal sanctification but for a mission: acting on behalf of justice and participating in the transformation of the world	Church is directed toward all, but begins from and for the interest of the poor, from their basic needs and desires, and struggles toward liberation.	Presupposes People of God and church-communion; shared <i>potestas sacra</i> within the Church; evangelical witnessing in terms of witnessing to the values of compassion, justice, and human rights – values that also represent Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God.

What follows is an attempt to reflect on the creedal attributes or truth of Christianity through the perspective of the model *Sambahayan ng Diyos*. I assume that the ecclesial character of the Christian family household

in the context of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity is a lifetime task and challenge for the family Church. To be sure this article focuses on the *Filipino sambahayan* model as suggested earlier.¹⁹ It should be noted that this model neither rejects nor invalidates the other models previously mentioned. It should instead be understood as fundamental and complementing the other models.

Sambahayan Ng Diyos as One

“At the heart of the Church is the person of Jesus Christ.”²⁰ His life and self-sacrificial love paved the way for the emergence of “a new community, a family of faith born in the Spirit” – the same Spirit whom Jesus ‘hands on’ to the Church, thus “a new creation, God’s ‘household’.”²¹ When one talks about the unity of the Church it neither rests chiefly on the unity of the members among themselves nor on the Church itself “but on the unity of God, which is efficacious through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.”²² This basic foundation manifested itself in the corporate experience of the early

¹⁹ In the Philippines, there has been a dearth of journal-published articles dealing directly with the theme of domestic church up until the post-Vatican II times.

²⁰ Joseph C. Atkinson, “Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 3 (2005): 603.

²¹ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences VIII, *The Asian Family toward a Culture of Integral Life*, in *FABC Papers* no. 111 (n.d), n. 60. For a comprehensive treatment of home and family as one of the most authentic and important locations of the faith-community, I highly recommend Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

²² Küng, *The Church*, 273.

Christian communities of the New Testament. Those who believed had themselves baptized were infused with the Spirit and became part of one Church sharing the same faith. They had one Lord, one Spirit, and one baptism.²³ Concretely they constituted themselves as church when two or three of them gathered in his name for there he was in their midst (Mt. 18:20). As the New Testament data abundantly shows the gatherings normally occurred in the homes.²⁴

Sambahayan ng Diyos can be religiously described in most fundamental terms as a community of *baptized* and *believing* Christians who are enlivened and bonded by the Spirit to profess one faith and worship one Lord as a new family of believers. The Christian family anchors the ultimate *pagkakakaisa* (unity) of the members not on ethnic, social, or kinship identity but on being *mga anak*

²³ Küng gives a list of what he considers as well-known classic New Testament texts on the unity of the Church: “1 Cor. 1:10-30 [a warning against divisions and an admonition to be united in Christ, the only foundation]; 1 Cor. 12 [the unity of the spirit in a multiplicity of gifts, one body with many members]; Gal. 3:27f [all are one in Christ]; Acts 2:42 [perseverance in the teaching of the apostles and in fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in prayer]; Acts 4:32 [the company of the believers are of one heart and soul]; Jn. 10:16 [one shepherd and one flock]; Jn 17:20-26 [all are one like the father and the Son] (Küng, *The Church*, 272-273). One can add Eph. 4:1-6 which Küng regards as the “most pertinent summary of what the unity of the Church is according to the New Testament” (Ibid., 273).

²⁴ This does not necessarily idealize the home—but shows the early communities' lack of public places of worship. In fact, during the first 3 centuries, this was usual except in times of persecution when Christians would worship in secret in catacombs and other hidden places. Cf. house churches because of persecution, like in China or some Islamic countries; also, “born-again” setups.

(children) under the one parenthood *ng Diyos* (of God). The authority-based character of the Filipino family may not totally disappear but relationships between parents/elders and children/grandchildren are to be purified in the light of Jesus' discipleship of equals. The parents/elders remain to be respected (*ginagalang*) as they regard the dignity of their children with respect making sure that the latter are guided with patience to become who they can in the spirit of the gospel of love, peace, compassion, and righteousness. *Pagkakaisa* also challenges the hierarchically or patriarchally shaped or conditioned family to progressively move into "a sphere of relative gender equality."²⁵

No member exists apart from the rest and what happens to one affects the entire family household. There must be a mutual appreciation of the loving interdependence (*pagkakaisa* as a noble expression of *pakikipagkapwa*) that exists among the members. Here the family gives preferential attention and concern to the weak and vulnerable members, be they parents/guardians or children since *kung ano ang sakit ng kalingkingan ay siya ring sakit ng buong katawan* (what ails the little finger also ails the whole body).

The spirit of unity in the church of the home is experienced by the members where *utang na loob* as a cultural value is elevated into filial gratitude to God the Creator and ultimate Source of all that is good for the gift of life and of presence. Following de Mesa's cultural exegesis of *utang na loob*, which he sees as a "debt of human solidarity," both the parents and the children have *utang na loob* to each other.²⁶ Shared meals in the

²⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 85.

²⁶ José M. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting*, Maryhill Studies 4 (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1991), 37-38.

household offer a regular opportunity for the members to partake of the food and drinks, and to commune with one another in the spirit of the Eucharistic unity. The celebration of the Lord's Supper in early Christianity is a meal of unity (1 Cor. 11:18-27). Within the family household meals shared is a most visible expression of family unity. If there is truth to the maxim "the family that prays together stays together", there is likewise truth to the saying "the family that eats together, stays together." The Eucharist in the words of a Filipino lay theologian spells "*bagong ugnayan*"²⁷ (new relationships).

This brings us to the critical function of the concept of *utang na loob*—solidarity for social or prophetic responsibility. The household-based *pagkakaisa* experiences of the family members deeply rooted in God and celebrated in the spirit of the Eucharist cannot but create a deep sense of connection with neighbors (especially those who have no food), the community, the society, and the entire cosmos. Pope Francis' vision articulated in *Fratelli tutti* covers the Filipino family household and its members: "Each particular group becomes part of the fabric of universal communion and there discovers its own beauty. All individuals, whatever their origin, know that they are part of the greater human family, without which they will not be able to understand themselves fully" (149).

The unity *ad intra* must open up toward unity *ad extra*.

Sambahayan Ng Diyos as Holy

The word 'holy' is a modern English rendition of the Hebrew bible word *kadash* which denotes the idea of

²⁷ Ibid., 210-223.

separation or being set apart or cut off.²⁸ The notion refers “to an election for the service of the holy God.”²⁹ What matters, however, in the biblical concept is not human activity itself but the sanctifying will and word of God. The holiness of God manifests itself in varied ways:³⁰ the coming of God’s kingdom to people through God even as God’s name is hallowed in people;³¹ God as the logical subject of sanctification;³² and justification and sanctification of people as God’s work³³ realized in Christ.³⁴ In Pauline writings, the concept of sanctification is usually couched in passive terms. The “saints” are believers who are “sanctified.”³⁵ This is a corrective of the Filipino *magpapakabanal* (to work to become holy) which tends to gloss over the divine initiative and action (despite Corinthians 13, James 2:14-26, and Galatians 5:6).

Hans Küng has observed that in the New Testament account, in contrast to the Old Testament, there is no reference to holy places or objects, even celebrations like the Eucharist and baptism, set apart for God’s purpose. This means that material elements or human actions “do not of themselves create holiness in a magic or automatic way, but are dependent on a holy God on the one hand and the human response of faith on the other.”³⁶ This

²⁸ Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology*, 88.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Küng, *The Church*, 324-325.

³¹ Cf. Mt. 6:9; Lk. 11:2.

³² Cf. Ez. 36:23; 20:41; 28:22; Is. 5:16.

³³ Rom. 8:33; II Thess. 2:13; cf. Eph. 1:4; I Thess. 5:23.

³⁴ 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; Rom. 1:4.

³⁵ 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7; cf. 1:6; 1 Cor. 1:24; Phil. 1:1; Col. 3:12. See also 1 Pet. 1:15f; cf. Lev. 11:44: “Only through divine sanctification can men actively become holy – holy in the ethical sense. . . .” (Küng, *The Church*, 325).

³⁶ Ibid.

theological axiom places the Filipino homes' penchant for altars and sacred objects or praying together in a proper place. Objects and human actions themselves do not make the family holy.

Much closer to the spirit of Jesus, the call to *kadash* means showing compassion to people, especially the marginalized ones.³⁷ God's call sets us apart in the world to be in solidarity with the suffering humanity. So, to be holy in the New Testament perspective is not primarily cultic.³⁸

The image of *bahay* can serve as a metaphor to express the notion of holiness. The sense of being together in an enclosed space and living together under one roof symbolically points to the biblical notion of an elect people set apart for divine purpose. But while the choice to live in the same house separate from other households is a human cultural act, the choice to live as a *holy* people "*sa isang sambahayan ng Diyos*" is a faith-response to the divine call. Lest the image being conjured is that of an exclusive group, it must be reiterated that faith-response to the divine call to be holy entails working for unity that breaks down artificial barriers of division

³⁷ The cultic view of holiness was institutionalized in the purity system of the Jewish social world of old. The system sharply structured the ancient society according to those who considered themselves 'pure' and those who were considered 'impure.' The criterion for determining purity was based on birth, behavior, health or well-being, wealth, gender, and nationality. Jesus attacked the purity system "that created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile" and preached "a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but the ethos and politics of compassion" (Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* [San Francisco: Harper, 1994], 53-61).

³⁸ Ibid., 50-52, 53-58.

and builds bridges of goodwill and respect inside and outside the domestic church. The holiness of the *sambahayan ng Diyos* presupposes the gracious and gratuitous action of God who calls, forms, and transforms. The familial spirituality emerges from and is sustained within the fabric of family life itself where faith in the Trinitarian God lies at the core of the spirituality.

The profound acknowledgment of the Trinitarian dimension and the celebration of the Eucharistic spirit in the home is a celebration of *mga magkakapatid* (brothers and sisters; family members) who share the same vision of Jesus about living life to its fullness. If the *sambahayan ng Diyos* “draws her life from the Eucharist”³⁹ then its members must learn how to treat the least, the lost, and the last with deep respect befitting their dignity while participating within its resources and means in alleviating the sufferings of the poor. For this purpose, the church in/of the home supports advocacies for social structural changes—mindful that action in the name of justice and participation in changing the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel.⁴⁰

Michael Amalodoss offers an unsettling Eucharistic reflection that challenges us to go beyond the dole-out approach:

...a community that does nothing to share its goods with the poor has no right to celebrate the Eucharist. Its Eucharist will have no meaning. (However)...it is not enough that Christians share what they have. They also have to get involved in movements that seek to promote more just economic, commercial, and political structures... I do not think that without a sense of community and solidarity, we can move towards a more

³⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de eucharistia* 1 (2003).

⁴⁰ Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (1971), 6.

just world. The Eucharist must give Christians this sense of community and solidarity....⁴¹

Evangelical poverty, described by Doohan as just relationship with earthly goods, advocated for all brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is an indispensable requirement to be part of his new family.⁴² A holy *sambahayan* is “essentially a poor Church, that is, a Church that has visibly and palpably renounced mammon’s rule for the sake of God’s Reign.”⁴³ Happy are the churches of the home that live a life of simplicity free from inordinate desires of earthly possessions and complemented by a culture of sharing for theirs is the kingdom of God. This is one of the most difficult evangelical counsels to observe by the family members. It is because they are strongly conditioned even within the Christian movement to presume that it is perfectly fine to accumulate material possessions—an accepted social pursuit—since the members are not ordained presbyters or without the religious vow of poverty. It does not help that there abound preachers of the gospel of prosperity.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Michael Amalodoss, “The Eucharist and the Christian Community.” <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr005/amalodoss.htm> (accessed July 4, 2009).

⁴² Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church*, 117.

⁴³ Aloysius Pieres, “I Believe in the Holy Spirit: Ecumenism in the Churches and the Unfinished Agenda of the Holy Spirit.” <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr005/pieris1.htm> (accessed July 4, 2009).

⁴⁴ See Erron Medina and Jayeel Cornelio, “The Prosperity Ethic: Neoliberal Christianity and the Rise of the New Prosperity Gospel in the Philippines.” *Pneuma* 43 (2021): 72–93.

Prosperity, however, may be read via the way of Jesus: “When Jesus of Nazareth went around preaching and healing, he was often seen or associated with the poor; he was there in

Sambahayan Ng Diyos as Catholic

In its etymological provenance, the term “catholic” (Gr. καθολικός; Lat. *catholicus* or *universalis*) refers to or is directed toward the whole or what is general.⁴⁵ In classical Greek, the word has something to do with general statements (universals as distinct from individuals) or with universal or world history.⁴⁶ Informed Catholics know that the word “catholic” *as applied to the Church* is not found both in the Old and the New Testament.⁴⁷ Ignatius of Antioch (died *circa* 110) was the first one to use the word to refer to the Church in New Testament times in his famous words: “Wherever the bishop is, there his people should be, just as, where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”⁴⁸ In this context, Küng explains that “‘Catholic Church’ means quite straightforwardly the whole Church, the complete Church, in contrast to the local Episcopal Churches.”⁴⁹ Theologically the catholicity of the Church is based on its all-embracing identity that is not inward-oriented but

solidarity with them as he dined with outcasts and forgave their sins. He brought prosperity to the poor, that is, by making them ‘feel well’ (*prosperus* in Latin) again” (Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “Culture as Enabler for SDGs: Learning from Jesus of Nazareth's Vision/Mission,” *Journal of Dharma* 46, 3 [July-September 2021]: 350).

⁴⁵ See Küng, *The Church*, 296, footnote 15.

⁴⁶ It even refers to the whole body affected by dropsy (Ibid., 297).

⁴⁷ The word appears in the New Testament only once and in adverbial form at that rendered as “thoroughly” or “completely” or “totally” [Acts 4:18], without ecclesial referent (idem., *The Church*, 297).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 297.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

essentially linked with the universal message of Jesus.⁵⁰ Its prerequisites are faith, *metanoia*, and the doing of the will of God. “(F)rom its very origins and by its very nature, the Church is world-wide, thinking and acting with reference to the world, the whole inhabited earth, the *oikumene*,”⁵¹ The mission of the Church is oriented toward making the whole inhabited earth truly become the household of God.

The catholicity of *sambahayan* calls for moving out of ethnic parochialism or social individualism⁵² to be able to connect with others differently situated through the language of love, of hope, of healing, of unity—all grounded on the saving truths of the Gospel. Today, partaking of the Church’s universal mission of salvation is more and more expressed in terms of prophetic dialogue. The church in/of the home stands firm on the fundamental tenets of the Christian teachings based on the Judeo-Christian scriptures but its proclamation of the gospel is expressed in terms of dialogue at different levels of human and religious relationships.

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has

⁵⁰ “Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” [Mk. 16:15], to “all nations” [Mt. 28:19], “until the end of the world” [Mt. 28:20], as “witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” [Acts 1:8].

⁵¹ Küng, *The Church*, 303. The catholicity or universality of the Church in its theological sense must not be primarily seen in terms of spatial extensity, numerical quantity, cultural and social variety, and temporal continuity (Ibid., 300-304), although these realities admittedly form part of the ‘visible-ness’ of the Catholic Church.

⁵² “Social individualism” is a term coined by Mina Ramirez to describe the reality of extreme family-centeredness in the Philippines (Mina M. Ramirez, *Understanding Philippine Social Realities through the Filipino Family: A Phenomenological Approach* [Malate, Manila: Asian Social Institute, 1984], 50).

given the *sambahayan ng Diyos* a clue: “(t)he Church becomes truly catholic when she is transformed by entering into dialogue with the cultures and religions of Asia and transforms them with the power of the Spirit who makes everything new.”⁵³ According to *Ecclesia in Asia* the “desire for dialogue... is not simply a strategy for peaceful coexistence among peoples; it is an essential part of the Church’s mission..., a veritable vocation for the Church.”⁵⁴ Sharing the same missionary attitude and orientation, the members of the domestic church approach persons and groups with respect while proclaiming the gospel of salvation less through words and more through their acts of goodness (Mt. 5:14-16). This is called the dialogue of life which presupposes that “(l)ife in all its forms is connected with the Source of life...(and) to “recognize (Him)...requires that we live together and appreciate our humanity; we live together and recognize our need for one another to protect and sustain life.”⁵⁵

This demands nothing less than the spirit of humility and an attitude of listening. As *Ecclesia in Asia* puts it: “Proclamation is prompted not by sectarian impulse nor the spirit of proselytism nor any sense of superiority” (*EA* 20; cf. 4, 31, 46).

Sambahayan Ng Diyos as Apostolic

The word ‘apostle’ etymologically comes from the Greek word ἀπόστολος, which means “somebody sent” or

⁵³ Jacob Parappaly, “Church's Dialogue with Cultures and Religions.” <http://www.idcrdialogue.com/seminars.php> (accessed July 4, 2009).

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), n. 29.

⁵⁵ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2012), 152-153.

“ambassador.”⁵⁶ In the New Testament, it has various shades of meaning: it can refer to the twelve,⁵⁷ to the ambassadors of the Church,⁵⁸ to the authorized messenger or messengers of the churches,⁵⁹ to missionaries,⁶⁰ or to Christ himself.⁶¹ The Pauline writings suggest a twofold meaning of the word: (1) those who are witnesses of the risen Lord, to whom the crucified Lord has revealed himself as living; (b) those who have been commissioned by the Lord for missionary preaching.⁶²

The adjective ‘apostolic,’ like ‘catholic’ does not appear in the Bible; it was the Fathers of the Church who used it frequently.⁶³ In its original and most general meaning, it is “having a direct link with the apostles of Christ.”⁶⁴ Despite its non-occurrence in the Bible, the notion serves as the crucial criterion in determining the truthfulness of the ecclesial attributes: “The Church can only be truly one, holy, and catholic if it is in all things an *apostolic* Church.”⁶⁵ The apostles, actual witnesses of Jesus’

⁵⁶ Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. version (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), s.v. “apostle.” Cf. Küng, *The Church*, 346. The concept of apostle was derived from the Hebrew “schaliach” [e.g. 1 Kg. 14:6, where a prophet appears as God’s messenger], which during the post-exilic period technically referred to the envoys of Jewish authorities.

⁵⁷ Mt. 10:2; Mk. 6:30; Gal. 1:17.

⁵⁸ Acts 14:4; cf. 13:3.

⁵⁹ Jn. 13:16; II Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25.

⁶⁰ 1 Cor. 12:28; 15:7; II Cor. 11:5; Rev. 2:2.

⁶¹ Heb. 3:1.

⁶² See II Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25. Cf. the first verses of I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Romans; cf. also Ephesians, Colossians, I and II Timothy, Titus.

⁶³ Like in Ignatius of Antioch’s writings and in the “Martyrdom of Polycarp” (Küng, *The Church*, 345).

⁶⁴ Küng, *The Church*, 345.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 344.

ministry, passion, and resurrection, occupied a unique irreplaceable role in the living tradition of Christianity. Being actual witnesses that they were and constituting the original group of Jesus' followers, their teachings based on the sayings and deeds of the Teacher and the Prophet guaranteed ecclesial fidelity to the truth of the gospels. The apostolicity of the Church, then, refers to its identity in Christian faith and practice with the church of the apostles.⁶⁶

The church of the apostles in its most basic form is incarnated in the *sambahayan ng Diyos* being commissioned and sent by Jesus Christ to proclaim the good news of salvation. The apostolic familial structure and relationships (communion) serve the mission. The mission is precisely to move out of the domestic confines and share Jesus' message of love with everyone above all in and through witnessing. By its very nature the church in/of the home is missionary "since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This plan flows from "fountain-like love," the love of the Father."⁶⁷ Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the Christian family is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is a church because there is a mission. To participate in a mission is to participate in the movement of God's love

⁶⁶ The idea of apostleship is not confined to the twelve, in fact, the function of the twelve [symbolically representing the twelve tribes of Israel in the light of Jesus' eschatological message] was restricted "to the time of the founding of the Church, or perhaps to the evangelization of the Jews" (Ibid., 350). It was Paul who made the notion of apostleship central to his theology, an idea that is linked to the worldwide mission of the Church as an eschatological event (Ibid., 351).

⁶⁷ Vatican II, *Ad gentes* 2.

toward people since God is a fountain of sending love.⁶⁸ It is even more profound to say that the *sambahayan ng Diyos* does not only have a mission to fulfill, but it also *is* mission, or mission is the very identity.

To belabor the point to proclaim is to be dialogical according to the Asian bishops.⁶⁹ The Asian ‘both-and’ approach makes this a dialectical possibility not only in the theoretical but also in the practical realm. Michael Amalodoss offers a nuanced understanding:

‘Proclamation’ and ‘dialogue’ are two moments in one conversation or relationship. One cannot proclaim without dialoguing, that is taking into account the other person’s experience. One cannot dialogue without proclaiming, that is witnessing to one’s faith-convictions. Proclamation is not dialogue. Yet, they can happen together in the same relationship, though they may be in tension with each other. At any given time, one may be more dominant. Abstracting the activities from the concrete relationship impoverishes them and isolates them. They are no longer experiential. Conceptual logic cannot handle this.⁷⁰

For Aloysius Pieris the command to baptize nations and make disciples must be disinfected from the

⁶⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

⁶⁹ Thesis 6 of the FABC 1987 document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue of the FABC Theological Advisory Commission* (now known as the FABC Office of Theological Concerns) cited in Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, “Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences,” FABC Papers No. 109. <http://www.idcrdialogue.com/seminars.php> (accessed July 4, 2009).

⁷⁰ Michael Amalodoss, “Is There an Asian Way of Doing Theology?”, <http://www.idcrdialogue.com/seminars.php> (accessed July 4, 2009).

venomous zeal for proselytism. He brought us back to what Jesus did by criticizing, even ridiculing proselytism or conversion from one religion to another (see Mt. 23:15). Jesus' call was for us to change our ways (*metanoia* in Greek; *shub* in Hebrew) and he was not particularly interested about religious identity. Conversion means negatively outright rejection of excessive dependence on creatures and mammon (= idolatry) and positively living in the freedom that comes from sole dependence on God, our divine parent. Conversion to Jesus' new family is repudiating every form of idolatry and embracing the Kingdom that belongs to the poor and the marginalized. It is in this sense that we can understand the command, "make disciples of nations."

The programmatic Lukan passage (4:18-19) which presents Jesus' mission by the Spirit is vividly oriented toward the liberation of the poor from material deprivation and social exclusion. Hence, the mandate to baptize and make disciples of nations cannot and should not be taken out of this context, namely, the mission of liberation directed clearly to the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the outcasts, and the oppressed. They who have been made strangers by a social structure that has created sharp divisions among social classes are *hindi ibang tao* (not strangers; one among us) in God's *sambahayan* but *mga magkakapatid* in faith. The *sambahayan* perspective must have an outreach dimension to ensure that it does not separate itself from the peoples' struggles to build a more just and more humane social order. The task is brought to the fore in bold relief in light of what the PCP II calls as imbalances in the country's economic and political situation.⁷¹

⁷¹ The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines has observed that "(t)he poverty and destitution of the great mass of our people are only too evident, contrasting sharply with the wealth and luxury.... Power and control are also elitist,

No functionally Christian family wants its members to be deprived, to suffer, to get sick, to be excluded and treated like a second-class member. Growth and care in the *sambahayan* are geared toward the well-being of the members. This brings us to the cosmic dimension of discipleship. The *sambahayan ng Diyos is challenged* to embrace and consider the whole cosmos as our common home (Francis, *Laudato Si'*) worthy of concern and care.

Pieris offers us an interesting insight into the inherent link between the body and the cosmos: There is an eschatological reason that shows the intimate relationship between our bodies and God's creation.⁷² We all confess to the resurrection of the body. The concept of the body should be detached from the Greco-Roman philosophical connection that tends to relegate it to the purely physical as opposed to the spiritual, the latter being superior to the former so that the 'body' is the whole person: "I am my body." When we confess "I believe in the resurrection of the body," we commit ourselves to helping usher in the dawn of a new heaven and a new earth. The phrase "heaven and earth" refers to this world system, for we have no other world where we can go to as to a "heaven." This world has to be transformed through our bodily resurrection into a new creation, which is our future which dawns from God when we with Her Spirit do our part of this humanly impossible task. However, we cannot believe in the resurrection of all creation without believing in our body-liness. The Bible teaches us that it is the Spirit in us that calls each one of us into an individual identity bodily involved in socio-physical solidarity with other humans and with nature. The body

lopsidedly concentrated on established families that tend to perpetuate themselves in political dynasties." *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1992), n. 24.

⁷² Pieris, "I Believe," 20.

is the human person epitomizing as well as linking up the whole of creation. Therefore, we cannot have life everlasting in the Spirit without our bodiliness, i.e., without the whole physical universe being resurrected into a new heaven and a new earth.

We have degraded the earth we are living in and we should restore it to its integrity with the same concern in providing ourselves with healthful dwellings. Poisoning the earth puts our bodies in danger; to hurt nature is to hurt our bodies. Pieris sums up the immediate cosmic agenda of the Church as an attempt to transform the planet into what the Creator envisions in the here and now: the cosmos should be (a) a “Home with One Table, where the gifts of creation are enjoyed together by all its inhabitants, where some do not gorge while others starve (1 Cor. 11. 21); (b) A Temple of Worship and a House of Prayer where mammon is given no chance to turn it into a “Den of Robbers” (Lk 19:46) or an “Open Market” (Jn 2:16); (c) A Garden of Delight where Creation remains the “enjoyable Icon” of the Creator’s beauty, which is the desired fruit of *liberating wisdom*, rather than “a monstrous idol” of technocracy which is the forbidden fruit of *power-generating knowledge* (Gen 3:1ff).

That is another major challenge for the *sambahayan ng Diyos* in its becoming. At any rate, this fundamental tenet of faith must not be lost: that the church in/of the home is not the sender but the one sent. The varied ways by which it manifests its apostolicity, then, are ultimately subject and accountable to the vision and the will of the Sender.

Conclusion

The foregoing reflection is meant to bring to light the theological foundation of the proposed *sambahayan ng Diyos* under the rubric of unity, holiness, catholicity, and

apostolicity and provide guideposts and directions for the ongoing growth of the domestic church. This is a growth that is informed by Christian faith, formed by the gospel teachings, and transformed from within with the faith-inspired collaboration of the members in building up the church and in their social and ecological engagements beyond its domestic confines.

I suppose that my reflections on the creedal attributes in the context of the Filipino church in/of the home are in varying ways and degrees reflected among the Christian families on the ground contingent upon differences in their socio-economic situations. Learning experiences in the light of Jesus' paschal mystery are ongoing. The reality of the domestic church is better viewed, not as 'noun', but as 'verb', that is, the household church is continuously in the process of becoming given its faith in the abiding presence of God's Spirit and its openness to the latter's guidance and promptings. After all, the Filipino Christian family is not merely *bahay* (physical structure) but above all *bagong ugnayan* (relationships).

To be sure the domestic church's performative character is not merely a mimicry of the institutional church in its structure, mere embracing of official teachings, displaying religious objects, or observing liturgical feasts and practices imported from the larger church, however significant they are especially in the Filipino religious culture. It is more than the total of the preceding. In its unique way of being-in-the-world as authentic faith communities, "(what) the members of the family know to be their own experience of the sacred in the particularities of marriage, sexual intimacy, procreation, parenting; the building, sustaining and decay of intimate relationships; the struggles of providing, sheltering, and feeding—this experience is authentic and must be part of the knowledge of the

gathered church.”⁷³

Domestic churches must learn to drink from their wells as they grow in unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

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⁷³ Wendy Wright, *Sacred Dwelling* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 24-25.

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Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Insights for Catholic Schools in the Philippines

Julius Anthony L. Porqueriño

Abstract: Catholic schools in the Philippines give due importance to children's spiritual development. However, initiatives that support children's spirituality often emphasize a distinct Catholic formation, potentially overlooking students from diverse religious backgrounds or worldviews. This article critically examines scholarship on children's spirituality to propose an alternative approach. By exploring themes of space, time, body, relationships, and agency, the article identifies practical strategies for nurturing spirituality broadly and inclusively. These strategies aim to create environments that support the spiritual growth of all children, regardless of their religious traditions or worldviews.

Keywords: Children • Children's Spirituality • Nurturing Spirituality • Catholic Schools

Introduction

In the Philippines, the holistic development offered by Catholic schools typically involves “a distinctly Christian formation, with an essential religious dimension and confessional purpose.”¹ Holistic development here refers to the education of the whole person, including one's social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. This approach also aims at the formation of individuals given their ultimate end and contribution to the good of society.²

¹ Johnny C. Go, *Religious Education from a Critical Realist Perspective: Sensus Fidei and Critical Thinking*, Routledge Studies in Critical Realism (New York: Routledge, 2019), 13.

² For discussions on the whole-person formation in Catholic schools, see *Gravissimum educationis, Decree on Christian Education*, October 28, 1965 (accessed April 2, 2021),

Due to the predominantly Catholic population, spiritual formation in Philippine schools is often linked to Catholic tradition. Catholic schools would thus organize formation programs that include liturgies, recollections, retreats, and community services.³ While worthwhile, these may give the impression that the nurturing of children's spirituality is founded on the Catholic faith. Against the backdrop of the whole-person formation, we may ask: If spiritual development is crucial, how can Catholic schools nurture the spirituality of all students, including those with different religions or worldviews?

To address the question, this article proposes a more inclusive approach to nurturing spirituality in Catholic schools. First, it develops a broad understanding of children's spirituality; second, it explains the necessity of nurturing spirituality, and; finally, it explores ways to nurture children's spirituality and its implications for Catholic schools' formation programs. This study relies on existing literature that deals with relevant issues and developments and relates them to the local setting.

Nurturing Children's Spirituality

Defining spirituality is complex and any attempt to create a single, universal definition may be accused of

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html, paragraph no. 1; The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, March 19, 1977 (accessed April 2, 2021), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html, paragraph nos. 19 & 29.

³ See Jove Jim S. Aguas, "Catholic Education in the Philippines," in *Encyclopedia of Teacher Education*, ed. Michael A. Peters (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 9.

reductionism.⁴ Spirituality's complexity arises from its diverse interpretations across theology, philosophy, religious studies, psychology of religion, sociology, anthropology, and medicine, each offering unique assumptions and perspectives.⁵ This complexity increases with the inclusion of the spirituality of specific groups, such as children, whose experiences and expressions add new dimensions to the field. Research on children and childhood not only has added complexity to the definition of spirituality but also enriched and challenged the previously adult-focused discourse on spirituality.⁶

Following the view of Tony Eaude, rather than seeking a universally agreed definition of children's spirituality, it is more helpful to identify common features and use a range of metaphors to understand it.⁷ While this survey is broad and not exhaustive, it provides a foundational definition of children's spirituality and suggests approaches for its nurturance.

Annemie Dillen argues that seeing children as “not-yet” adults or “blank sheets of paper” implies that they need knowledge transmitted by adults, portraying them

⁴ See Tony Eaude, “Shining Lights in Unexpected Corners: New Angles on Young Children's Spiritual Development,” *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 8, no. 2 (2003): 152.

⁵ See Doug Oman, “Defining Religion and Spirituality,” in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, 2nd Edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 2013), 23–47.

⁶ See Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, “Exploring Scientific and Theological Perspectives on Children's Spirituality,” in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 121.

⁷ See Tony Eaude, “Revisiting Some Half-Forgotten Ideas on Children's Spirituality,” *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 28, no. 1 (2023): 24.

as incomplete beings.⁸ Despite the recognition that children have the inherent potential to be spiritual, these presumptions lead many adults to overlook or undervalue children's spiritual experiences and expressions. Joyce Mercer notes that children's insights are usually brushed off as insignificant when they are described as "cute," "precocious" or just "mimicking adults".⁹ Susannah Cole adds that "adult assumptions about spirituality, which rely on rational thinking and religious concepts, often hinder the ability to understand the spiritual nature of children."¹⁰ Karen-Marie Yust and Erin Reibel argue that in religious education, children are seen as needing to be filled with pre-determined religious content and cannot be trusted to engage in meaningful spiritual practices and reflection.¹¹ This view, stemming from developmental theories, assumes children cannot actively engage meaningfully in spirituality.

Developmental stage theories that were developed in psychology constructed an image of children and their spirituality as only becoming and not being, and as only

⁸ See Annemie Dillen, "Religious Participation of Children as Active Subjects: Toward a Hermeneutical-Communicative Model of Religious Education in Families with Young Children," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2007): 38–40.

⁹ Joyce Ann Mercer, "Children as Mystics, Activists, Sages, and Holy Fools: Understanding the Spirituality of Children and Its Significance for Clinical Work," *Pastoral Psychology* 54, no. 5 (May 2006): 498.

¹⁰ Susannah Cole, "Situating Children in the Discourse of Spirituality," in *Spirituality, Education & Society: An Integrated Approach*, ed. Njoki Nathani Wane, Energy L. Manyimo, and Eric J. Ritskes (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), 5.

¹¹ See Karen-Marie Yust and Erin Reibel, "Innovations in Children's Spiritual Nurture," *Religious Education* 118, no. 5 (2023): 504.

a means to an end.¹² Examples of these theories in developmental psychology include Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory, and Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory.¹³ Although these theories offer a framework for understanding children, they assume the existence of a "universal child" or a child who represents all children and progresses through a series of predictable and linear developmental stages.¹⁴ These theories have also influenced other theories that attempt to understand children's religious and spiritual development such as James Fowler's faith development theory.¹⁵ The images these theories construct may have inadvertently reinforced perceptions that children are empty vessels, incompetent and passive subjects, and not yet adults. Recent developments in children and childhood studies have challenged these traditional views, offering new perspectives on children and their spirituality. For one, scholars have been critical of the "universal child" and researchers recognize that each child is "unique and distinct to a variety of contexts

¹² See Jan Grajczonek, "How Shall We Know Them? Part 1 - the Construction of 'Child' and 'Childhood' in Official Church Educational Documents," *Journal of Religious Education* 58, no. 2 (2010): 10.

¹³ For an illustration of the stage theories, see Saul McLeod, "Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development," Simply Psychology, June 6, 2018, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>; Saul McLeod, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," Simply Psychology, October 24, 2013, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>; Saul McLeod, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development," Simply Psychology, May 3, 2018, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>.

¹⁴ See Grajczonek, "How Shall We Know Them? Part 1 - the Construction of 'Child' and 'Childhood' in Official Church Educational Documents," 9.

¹⁵ See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981).

including their social, cultural, political and religious contexts.”¹⁶ Another contemporary view advocates treating the child as a child, without making too much reference to the adult the child will become. This implies valuing the child’s inherent capacities, which include cognitive, affective, and even spiritual capacities. In other words, this perspective treats the child as a ‘competent subject,’ countering earlier views that treat them as incomplete or passive.

Recognizing children as competent subjects, scholars have employed qualitative methodologies that emphasize listening to children, and enhancing the understanding of their spirituality. Their studies would serve to enumerate and summarize key research findings on children's innate spirituality.

One of the earlier works demonstrating children's intrinsic spirituality is by Robert Coles, who conducted a longitudinal study with children. He found that “children are interested in the meaning of life, understand life as a journey, and are able to ask questions of ultimate meaning.”¹⁷ Building on Coles’ work, David Hay and Rebecca Nye affirmed children's innate spirituality.¹⁸ Using grounded theory, Nye analyzed interviews with children and coined the term “relational consciousness” to describe the spirituality observed in the conversations.¹⁹ “Relational consciousness” emerged as a result of

¹⁶ Grajczonek, “How Shall We Know Them? Part 1 - the Construction of ‘Child’ and ‘Childhood’ in Official Church Educational Documents,” 10.

¹⁷ See Jan Grajczonek, “Spiritual Development and Religious Education in the Early Years: A Review of the Literature” (Unpublished Report, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Brisbane, 2010), 14; See Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

¹⁸ See David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Rev. ed. (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

¹⁹ See Hay and Nye, 108–9.

two patterns observed during these interviews: that children exhibited an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness and that the conversations were expressed in the context of the child's relationship to other things, to oneself, to other people, and to God.²⁰ This relational consciousness became the basis for Nye's definition of spirituality:

Children's spirituality is an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality of life experiences. This awareness can be conscious or unconscious and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions, feelings, and thoughts. In childhood, spirituality is especially about being attracted towards 'being in relation', responding to a call to relate to more than 'just me' – i.e., to others, to God, to creation, or a deeper inner sense of Self. This encounter with transcendence can happen in specific experiences or moments, as well as through imaginative or reflective activity (thoughts and meaning-making).²¹

Elaine Champagne contributes to the discourse by recognizing children's spirituality in concrete situations or the activities of daily life.²² Using a phenomenological research methodology, she observed preschool children and used an adapted form of theological method to interpret her findings.²³ In her research, she observed three "spiritual modes of being": sensitive, relational, and existential. The sensitive mode of being involves how children use their senses to interact with the world, revealing their inner selves.²⁴ The relational mode of

²⁰ See Hay and Nye, 109.

²¹ Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), 6.

²² See Elaine Champagne, "Being a Child, a Spiritual Child," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2003): 44.

²³ See Champagne, 44.

²⁴ See Champagne, 45–46.

being pertains to the quality of the children's "interpersonal relations from a spiritual perspective."²⁵ Children's spirituality, in a sense, consists of forming connections with other people and the world around them. Coming to terms with being related to one's parents, family or peers creates a symbolic home for children and opens them to love.²⁶ Lastly, the existential mode of being concerns children's relation to time and space, meaning their engagement with the present moment or the experience of the "here and now."²⁷ This mode of being emphasizes the importance of the here and now for children, where they live and experience life.

Brendan Hyde, expands on Hay and Nye's research by engaging with children from three primary schools in Australia. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, Hyde was able to identify four characteristics that illustrate the innate spirituality of children. The first is the "felt sense," situated in the here-and-now of experience, highlighting an intense and immediate awareness of the present moment.²⁸ The second characteristic, "integrating awareness," refers to the children's capacity to enter into a deeper level of consciousness while remaining engaged in the initial activity that they are involved in.²⁹ The third characteristic, "weaving the threads of meaning," involves how children integrate diverse experiences into a coherent worldview. Hyde noted that the children's sense of wonder helps them express their spirituality as they use it "to make meaning of events and to piece

²⁵ See Champagne, 46.

²⁶ See Champagne, 50.

²⁷ See Champagne, 51.

²⁸ Brendan Hyde, "The Identification of Four Characteristics of Children's Spirituality in Australian Catholic Primary Schools," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 13, no. 2 (2008): 120.

²⁹ Hyde, 121–22.

together a worldview based around their attempts at meaning-making.”³⁰ The fourth characteristic, “spiritual questing,” refers to how children “seek to explore new and perhaps more authentic ways of connecting with self, others, the earth, and God.”³¹ Hyde also identified two factors that inhibit children’s spirituality. He referred to the first as “material pursuit,” where children prioritize material desires over connecting to others. Hyde argues that these desires focus only on satisfying the child’s superficial self or ego, neglecting the true self.³² The second factor, “trivializing,” occurs when children avoid confronting issues of meaning and value in life by creating a “façade of complacency” and making light of these topics.³³ He observed that this often results when children sense mistrust, suspicion, and ambiguity and, if left unchecked, may lead to the loss of meaning and purpose.³⁴

As research into children’s spirituality further develops, there is growing recognition that children are “competent subjects,” whose spirituality has its integrity and needs support. Accepting children as naturally spiritual beings does not guarantee that spiritual development will come automatically, nor does it mean that each child will experience the same spiritual development.³⁵ Children’s spirituality is a dynamic process rather than a static trait. Hay and Nye

³⁰ Hyde, 123.

³¹ Hyde, 124.

³² Brendan Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 143.

³³ Hyde, 149.

³⁴ Hyde, 157.

³⁵ See Annemie Dillen, “Children at the Center? Practical Theology by, about, and with Children,” in Annemie Dillen and Stefan Gärtner, *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring Boundaries*, vol. 47 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 135.

documented in their research the changes that occurred in children's spirituality over time noting what led to the resistance or a magnification of the spiritual.³⁶ They observed that gaining more knowledge and experiences leads to changes in children's spirituality. Micheline Wyn Moriarty upheld this view when she modified her understanding of spirituality to a more dynamic conceptualization. In her research, Moriarty describes the process of spirituality as evolving in a circular or spiral pattern within the child.³⁷ For Moriarty, "there was some evidence that identity formation developed out of experiences of heightened consciousness, leading to enhanced relationships and a sense of meaning or value," which then leads to the ongoing formation of "the sense of self."³⁸ However, this process does not always lead to positive development. Eade argues that the process of spirituality can either progress or regress, which is why he thinks the term 'development' cannot sufficiently capture the complexity of the process within the child.³⁹ In a recent article, Eade emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the "shadow" side of spirituality, which includes aspects children refuse to acknowledge but need to integrate for wholeness.⁴⁰ Thus, caregivers must guide this dynamic process toward fostering a healthy spirituality.

Drawing on these insights, it could be asserted that

³⁶ See Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 124–25.

³⁷ See Micheline Wyn Moriarty, "A Conceptualization of Children's Spirituality Arising out of Recent Research," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 16, no. 3 (2011): 283.

³⁸ Moriarty, 283.

³⁹ See Tony Eade, "Strangely Familiar?—Teachers Making Sense of Young Children's Spiritual Development," *Early Years* 25, no. 3 (2005): 245.

⁴⁰ See Tony Eade, "Revisiting Some Half-Forgotten Ideas on Children's Spirituality," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 28, no. 1 (2023): 24–25.

children's spirituality is an innate human potential that is seen in children. It is embedded in their consciousness, relationality including a relationship towards a transcendent 'other,' and their ability to make meaning. Ultimately, children's spirituality is a culturally mediated process that requires nurturing.⁴¹

On Nurturing

The term 'nurture' serves to address the spiritual needs of children. Common terms for supporting spiritual growth in children and adults include 'to form,' 'to develop,' and 'to nurture.' The term 'develop' is most frequently used for its emphasis on progression and growth.⁴² It aligns well with developmental stage theories, such as those of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler.⁴³ These theories describe a linear progression from a simpler to a more complex understanding of spirituality, which can be effective in structured educational environments.

However, using 'develop' can also imply a movement from less to more or from nothing to something. Dillen argues that this perspective may view children as "not-

⁴¹ See Brendan Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 23–44; See Roehlkepartain, "Exploring Scientific and Theological Perspectives on Children's Spirituality," 122–25.

⁴² For use of 'develop' or 'development', see Eugene Roehlkepartain et al., *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2006); Also see Peter L. Benson, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, and Stacey P. Rude, "Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 205–13.

⁴³ Roehlkepartain, "Exploring Scientific and Theological Perspectives on Children's Spirituality," 124.

yet” – either not yet adults or not yet full human beings.⁴⁴ Such a view risks overlooking children’s current capacities and contributions, leading to what Dillen describes as a “deficit approach.”⁴⁵ This approach overly emphasizes what children lack, rather than what they currently possess. Consequently, adults who adopt the deficit approach as their understanding of ‘develop’ might focus their support on filling perceived gaps in children’s spirituality, often neglecting to reinforce and stimulate the strengths that they already exhibit at the present moment.

Similarly, ‘form’ or ‘formation’ is widely used, particularly in religious contexts, to denote the shaping of spiritual identity. It is commonplace in Catholic schools and youth ministry to refer to efforts leading to the spiritual growth of children and young people. In his attempt to define spiritual formation, Max Turner lists all partial synonyms for ‘formation’ and all of them suggest a movement from nothing to something or from less to more.⁴⁶ Dallas Willard identified three different but interrelated meanings of spiritual formation but all of them understand the word formation as ‘shaping.’⁴⁷ This term suitably reflects the intentional guidance provided in educational or ministry settings, acknowledging that children and young people often start with a

⁴⁴ See Annemie Dillen, “Between Heroism and Deficit: Challenges to Research on Children’s Spirituality from a Christian Theological Standpoint,” *Concilium* 5 (2007): 60, 62.

⁴⁵ See Dillen, 62.

⁴⁶ See Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Formation in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22, no. 2 (2013): 188. Turner’s list of partial synonyms for ‘formation’ include: ‘transformation’, ‘development’, ‘building up’, ‘maturation’, ‘transformation’, ‘sanctification’.

⁴⁷ See Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What It Is and How It Might Be Done,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 4 (December 2000): 254–58.

less-defined spiritual identity that is progressively shaped by teachings and experiences. Yet, the language of 'formation' can imply that children's spirituality begins as entirely shapeless, and children become passive recipients of external influences. These could undermine the understanding of their agency and inherent spirituality.

The term 'nurture,' chosen for this article, aims to fill the gaps that both 'form' and 'develop' have by highlighting sustenance and support for children's spirituality to flourish in the present moment.⁴⁸ 'Nurture' incorporates the developmental progression of 'develop' and the intentional guidance of 'form,' while focusing on strengthening what is already present within the child.

The preference for 'nurture' reflects an understanding that while children require structured spiritual growth, they also thrive under supportive conditions that recognize and build upon their existing spiritual capacities. This choice does not aim to diminish the importance of 'develop' and 'form.' 'Develop' helps map out progression while 'form' focuses on shaping a child's spiritual understanding. By focusing on 'nurture,' this article aims to integrate these structured approaches into a holistic framework, supporting both the present strengths and future growth of children's spirituality. This balanced approach ensures that nurturing spirituality is not just about preparing for future maturity but also about enriching the child's current spiritual experience and expressions.

⁴⁸ Some publications that used 'nurture' to refer to the task of supporting children include Karen-Marie Yust et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); Holly Catterton Allen, ed., *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008); and Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*.

For the Sake of Children: Why Nurture their Spirituality?

Nurturing children's spirituality is not only beneficial but also necessary. Studies in medicine and psychology have shown that a person's spirituality and religion affect one's mental health and well-being. Most of these studies indicate a positive relationship, allowing clinicians to incorporate spirituality and religion into their interventions.⁴⁹ This implies that nurturing spirituality could lead to positive mental health. Eade links children's spirituality, particularly the search for meaning and connectedness, to their happiness, emotional well-being, and mental health.⁵⁰ From a rights perspective, developing the spiritual domain of children should be considered a fundamental right because of its integral role in children's overall development.⁵¹ The same article indicated that the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child promotes spiritual development and well-being.⁵² Additionally, nurturing children's spirituality can stimulate their "power within," a key aspect often discussed in power dynamics.⁵³ This underscores that nurturing children's spirituality should

⁴⁹ See Larkin Elderon Kao, John R. Peteet, and Christopher C. H. Cook, "Spirituality and Mental Health," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2020): 42–54.

⁵⁰ See Tony Eade, "Happiness, Emotional Well-Being, and Mental Health – What Has Children's Spirituality to Offer?," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (2009): 185–96.

⁵¹ See Fred B. Bryant et al., "The Child's Right to a Spiritual Life," in *International Handbook on Child Rights and School Psychology*, ed. Bonnie Kaul Nastasi, Stuart N. Hart, and Shereen C. Naser (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 307.

⁵² See Bryant et al., 309.

⁵³ See Annemie Dillen, "Empowering Children in Religious Education: Rethinking Power Dynamics," *Journal of Religious Education* 59, no. 3 (2011): 5.

be for the sake of the children.

Reflecting on Dillen's theological understanding of the phrase "for the sake of the children" provides a profound justification for nurturing children's spirituality. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing children's voices and contributions while protecting and providing for them.⁵⁴ While various theological positions on children claim to be for the sake of the children, perspectives such as viewing children as "not-yet adults," "future members of the Church," or "vulnerable beings" can be harmful.⁵⁵ These views often neglect children's inherent dignity and agency. To counter these negative views on children in the theological discourse, Dillen advocates for seeing children as subjects.⁵⁶ This notion underpins three key reasons for nurturing children's spirituality: building resilience, encouraging participation, and recognizing children as whole persons.

The first reason is to build children's resilience. Recognizing "children as subjects" means acknowledging them as both vulnerable persons and competent agents. Nurturing spirituality involves a balancing act between protecting children from harmful relationships or frameworks of meaning and respecting their inherent capacity to relate and make meaning. This approach fosters resilience, not only as a means to cope with loss and suffering but also as an inner resource for hope and positive engagement with everyday life.⁵⁷ Furthermore, focusing on resilience should inspire social action and support for children, ensuring that their capacity to cope

⁵⁴ See Annemie Dillen, "For the Sake of Children? Theology, Care and Children," *Hapág: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 16, no. 1–2 (2019): 85–97.

⁵⁵ Dillen, 90.

⁵⁶ Dillen, 93–95.

⁵⁷ See Dillen, 94.

does not excuse neglect of social responsibilities.

The second reason for nurturing spirituality is participation. While children's participation is often encouraged in the Church, they are sometimes perceived as a nuisance when they make noise or do not pay attention during celebrations of the sacraments. Seeing "children as subjects" means reconceptualizing the understanding of children's participation in theology. In this reconceptualized participation, their voices and insights are considered valuable. They are even encouraged to theologize because their insights are deemed significant in their communities and society. Nurturing their spirituality is necessary to stimulate meaningful participation.

The third reason is that the child is a whole person. Seeing children as whole persons and as active subjects means they should not be reduced to models or categories defining how adults must respond to them or address their needs. They are and will always be whole persons, who give and receive at the same time. They are capable of giving, participating, and sharing, while also needing guidance, support, and protection. Nurturing their spirituality respects and fosters their complete identity as whole persons.

The 'How' of Nurturing Children's Spirituality

Having justified the importance of nurturing children's spirituality, I now discuss how it can be effectively achieved particularly in the context of the Catholic schools in the Philippines. Drawing on Hyde's insights, four key areas are identified to nurture children's spirituality: space, time, body, and relationships.⁵⁸ Similarly, Nye uses the acronym SPIRIT—space,

⁵⁸ See Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 160.

process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, and trust—to nurture spirituality.⁵⁹ This discussion utilizes Hyde's categories and integrates some insights from Nye and other relevant literature. Additionally, this article introduces 'agency' as a critical theme, neither covered by Hyde nor Nye, to address the presence of power dynamics in the task of nurturing spirituality. These principles can be translated into practical applications to create the school environment that nurtures the spirituality of children.

Space

Space is a key factor in nurturing children's spirituality. Space connotes a place or an environment of freedom, where one can think, move, speak, or act freely. At home, such a space might be a dedicated room where children can just be. These spaces serve as places of retreat to get away from the noise and clutter of everyday life, acting as sanctuaries or safe spaces. According to Raisuyah Bhagwan, "When such sacred spaces are nurtured, children are allowed to 'be', to feel spiritually safe, and to share their hurts and struggles."⁶⁰ It is within these spaces that spirituality can be discovered and fostered.⁶¹ For many, including Christians, this space of freedom may be interpreted as a place to have a meaningful encounter with the divine. According to Hyde, nurturing spirituality can be done when those responsible for children furnish and maintain spaces and environments that allow their spirituality to flourish and

⁵⁹ Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 41.

⁶⁰ Raisuyah Bhagwan, "Creating Sacred Experiences for Children as Pathways to Healing, Growth and Transformation," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (2009): 226.

⁶¹ Bhagwan, 226.

grow.⁶² Nye similarly notes that the quality of space can have a positive or negative effect on one's spiritual well-being.⁶³

Nye identifies three types of spaces: physical, emotional, and auditory.⁶⁴ Physical spaces are tangible areas where children can go and experience support for their spirituality. Nye describes these as sacred spaces, noting they “speak their own language of meaning and help us express what we value.”⁶⁵ Children intuitively recognize the unique atmosphere and meaning of these places. The setup, furnishing, and decoration of these spaces communicate distinct messages to the children who enter them. For example, traditional classroom setups with chairs and tables facing the teacher communicate that the teacher is the primary source of knowledge, and proper behavior is expected to ensure order in the classroom. Emotional space encompasses areas that allow for personal expression and safety. Nye describes these spaces as those that allow individuals “to be apart, to be ourselves and perhaps have different opinions, but also the space in which we can feel closely held and safe.”⁶⁶ These spaces require balancing autonomy with safety and acceptance. In these spaces, children are encouraged to express themselves freely, yet with awareness and respect for others in the community. This dual challenge of autonomy and intimacy in emotional spaces is at the core of developing and maintaining spiritual communities.⁶⁷ Auditory space emphasizes the importance of silence. In auditory spaces, adults talk less and listen more, tuning into what the

⁶² See Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 161.

⁶³ See Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 42.

⁶⁴ See Nye, 42–45.

⁶⁵ Nye, 42.

⁶⁶ Nye, 45.

⁶⁷ See Nye, 45.

children are saying and not saying. This auditory space allows children to respond freely, without strictly conforming to adult expectations. It is important to note that providing space for spiritual nurture does not imply isolating children, but rather creating environments where they can explore and develop their spirituality with appropriate support.

To nurture children's spirituality in Catholic schools, providing these spaces need not just be spaces for prayer and meditation. Research in children's spirituality suggests that these spaces should support key attributes of spirituality: consciousness, relationality, and meaning-making. Firstly, these spaces should enable children to perform structured or unstructured tasks that heighten their consciousness. Such spaces allow children to focus on their activities, whether it be playing, reading, or doing chores. This enables deep engagement free from distractions. For example, bombarding spaces with activities merely to keep children busy can hinder meaningful engagement. This is common in many classrooms. Additionally, these spaces should provide children with opportunities to rest, be silent, and reflect on what they are doing. Secondly, to foster relationality, spaces for prayer are good for deepening children's relationship with the divine. However, the question remains as to whether children of other religions have their own spaces of prayer. Aside from prayer or meditation spaces, healthy spaces should be spaces that allow for a community atmosphere that cultivates mutual trust, respect, and open inquiry among its occupants.⁶⁸ Hyde's proposals for nurturing spirituality through spaces highly emphasize the role that adults play in the space, as they significantly influence how children make meaning. Thirdly, to support meaning-

⁶⁸ See Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 161.

making, healthy spaces should encourage exploration and a sense of wonder, which will then serve as the basis for the framework of meaning they will weave together. In such spaces, adults should avoid hastily dismissing or harshly judging the meanings children derive from their experiences. Healthy spaces should also allow for constructive dialogue between different worldviews, enhancing children's interaction with others. Hyde notes a concern when children in these spaces encounter ambiguous or potentially dangerous frameworks of meaning.⁶⁹ In such cases, adults might be tempted to completely take control of these meaning-making spaces or to take children away from them. While concerns for children's welfare and safety are legitimate, nurturing their spiritual dimension should come in the form of guidance and accompaniment, and not of control nor imposition of one's will. For example, if teachers find a child upset over a loss in a competition, they should resist the urge to dismiss the child's feelings simply to cheer them up. Instead, within this nurturing space, the teacher should help the child understand and process their feelings about the loss. For Hyde, the adult should act as a guide and a responsible partner, which sometimes means adopting a more passive or silent role. Shielding the child from negative feelings may inadvertently teach them that such emotions are unacceptable, discouraging them from openly sharing these negative emotions in the future.

It is also important to recognize that spaces for spiritual growth are not always active; they can be places of quiet and stillness. Hyde believes that skills like silence, stillness, and reflection should be cultivated and practiced in spaces of spiritual nurture.⁷⁰ Silence and reflection are crucial for developing a heightened level of

⁶⁹ See Hyde, 161.

⁷⁰ See Hyde, 162.

awareness and for reflecting on one's values and meaning. In schools, creating these silent spaces can be challenging. These spaces are often scarce in the school setting, requiring deliberate effort from adults. In addition, cultivating spiritual spaces sometimes means creating areas where adults are absent, allowing children to explore their spirituality independently. Children must have opportunities to nurture their spirituality in their own dedicated spaces. This approach requires adults to exercise wisdom, sensitivity, and trust, stepping back when necessary to allow children's independent spiritual flourishing. Catholic schools usually have dedicated space for these like chapels and prayer rooms. However, to be more inclusive silent reflection or meditation spaces that non-Catholic students can freely use can benefit everyone regardless of affiliation.

For Catholic schools to cultivate spaces as described above, they can turn to Eade's "hospitable space," which encapsulates what spaces for spiritual nurture look like.⁷¹ These spaces are designed to foster relationships based on mutual trust and provide opportunities for all children to be cared for and to care for others, regardless of one's beliefs and worldviews.⁷² In such environments, children are encouraged to reflect, imagine, and explore their feelings and responses, which helps them feel accepted and empowered. Emphasizing voluntary participation, schools can create spaces that encourage personal growth and spiritual exploration without obligation. These hospitable spaces avoid fast-paced, competitive, or outcome-driven environments, offering a sanctuary where students can pursue their spiritual

⁷¹ Tony Eade, "Creating Hospitable Space to Nurture Children's Spirituality-Possibilities and Dilemmas Associated with Power," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 3–4 (2014): 236–48.

⁷² Eade, 242.

journey at their own pace.⁷³ Regular classrooms can be the sites of these hospitable spaces.⁷⁴ Teachers play a crucial role in sustaining these spaces, ensuring they are welcoming and supportive while allowing students the freedom to explore and question spirituality on their terms. This approach not only respects the diverse spiritual backgrounds and social-cultural contexts of students but also fosters a culture of understanding and acceptance crucial for nurturing the spiritual lives of all students in Catholic schools.⁷⁵

Time

Nurturing spirituality requires dedicated time and a deep appreciation for the present moment. Time is crucial in nurturing spirituality, supporting the assumption that spirituality undergoes a process. This stands in contrast with the modern obsession with production or productivity. According to Nye, the focus on production prioritizes outcomes over processes, altering people's perception of time.⁷⁶ In this productivity-driven culture, individuals are measured by their output in a given amount of time. Regrettably, children's education often mirrors this production focus, emphasizing performance over genuine learning experiences. Children are judged according to their output and performances while teachers are measured by the number of high-performing children and the time spent to reach this

⁷³ Eade, 246.

⁷⁴ Eade, 245–46.

⁷⁵ See David M. Csinos, "From the Ground Up: Cultural Considerations in Research into Children's Spirituality and Theology," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 23, no. 1 (2018): 60–62; Annemie Dillen, "Children's Spirituality and Theologising with Children: The Role of 'Context,'" *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 25, no. 3–4 (2020): 239–43.

⁷⁶ See Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 46.

output.⁷⁷ However, it is vital to recognize that children, like their spirituality, are not mere products but are involved in an ongoing process. Adopting this perspective honors the present time, making it a key element of nurturing spirituality.

Supporting consciousness in children's spirituality requires allocating time for children's diverse experiences. As children grow more aware of their experiences, they must be encouraged to value each present moment. Referring to Hyde's concept of 'felt sense,' adults should give children opportunities to engage in the here and now of their experiences.⁷⁸ This challenge intensifies in performance-based educational systems, where children are expected to complete learning a set of skills or acquiring a set of knowledge by a certain deadline. Engaging in the present is often mistakenly seen as unproductive because it does not always show immediate results. Valuing the present moment challenges adults to both prepare and seize opportunities to nurture spirituality, even beyond planned activities. Furthermore, periods of silence and rest are crucial for spiritual nurturing, not wasted time.

Considering the importance of the present, it is necessary to take into account the current diverse, postmodern, milieu especially observable in advanced economies. Hyde notes that the present time is characterized by the plurality of ideas and the abandonment of or distrust in a single, absolute

⁷⁷ See Brendan Hyde, "Silenced by Performativity: The Child's Right to a Spiritual Voice in an Age of Neoliberal Educational Imperatives," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 26, no. 1–2 (2021): 9–23. In this work, Hyde argues that the performative-centered or outcomes-centered approaches to education, which are prevalent in many schools in the Philippines, silence the spiritual voices of children.

⁷⁸ Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 163.

framework of meaning.⁷⁹ There should be openness to how children use the present time to weave together diverse worldviews and forge their self-understanding and connections with others. This openness requires courage from adults because it may challenge their long-held traditions and frameworks of meaning. Therefore, valuing the present moment calls forth a dialogue-oriented approach.⁸⁰ This approach encourages adults to walk together with children, guiding them as they navigate through the plurality of meanings. Children thus receive the support they need to discern between constructive and destructive frameworks of meaning.

In Catholic schools, these principles can be applied to create an environment that values and nurtures the present moment. Allocating time for diverse experiences and opportunities for children to engage in the present can enhance their spiritual growth. Teachers should encourage periods of silence and rest. Giving time for dialogue-oriented approaches allows children to navigate diverse worldviews and develop their self-understanding. By focusing on the process than just outcomes, Catholic schools can support the holistic development of their students.

Body

For children, corporeality is a primal way of knowing.⁸¹ Initially, children connect with others and derive meaning through their senses. Educational institutions often prioritize cognitive skills like speaking and reading, overlooking other forms of learning.

⁷⁹ See Hyde, 163–64.

⁸⁰ See Dillen, “Between Heroism and Deficit: Challenges to Research on Children’s Spirituality from a Christian Theological Standpoint,” 64.

⁸¹ See Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 165.

Children are expected to read and write from an early age, under the assumption that verbal expression is the primary way of knowing. For Hyde, engaging the body and the senses is an important approach to nurturing the spirituality of children, particularly through what he terms ‘felt sense.’ In this felt sense, children “draw upon the wisdom of their bodies in a holistic sense.”⁸²

A bodily approach to nurturing spirituality involves designing experiences that fully engage children’s bodies. Engaging their bodies leads to a heightened consciousness, enabling children to reflect, connect, and make meaning. Play is a common activity that occupies children holistically. During play, children engage fully—mentally and physically—in relating with others, unleashing their imagination, and deepening self-understanding. Jennifer Mata-McMahon’s research supports this, finding that preschool teachers see free, open-ended play as vital for nurturing children’s spirituality.⁸³ While intellectual activities are important, adults should also incorporate sensorial, tactile, and hands-on activities.⁸⁴ Such experiences should encourage children to actively engage by “getting their hands dirty.” Bhagwan proposes several whole-body engaging activities, including:

- participating in sacred rituals that deepen the child’s identity and connectedness with their community and the divine;
- participating in creative and expressive arts such as poetry, drama, dance, and painting;
- practicing solitude and mindfulness for children;

⁸² Hyde, 165.

⁸³ See Jennifer Mata-McMahon, “Finding Connections between Spirituality and Play for Early Childhood Education,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 24, no. 1 (2019): 44–57.

⁸⁴ See Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 165.

- embracing an eco-spirituality or activities that engage the child's connectedness with nature.⁸⁵

In addition to these suggestions, Catholic schools can adopt some activities which are based on research on children's spirituality. Some of these include Jerome Berryman's Godly play and Yust and Reibel's embodied prayer.⁸⁶ However, it is important to note that implementing activities designed for children elsewhere in the world should not be done blindly. Schools must be aware of the cultural contexts of their students to ensure these activities are meaningful and do not inadvertently silence their voices. By adapting activities to fit the contextual needs of students, schools can create more impactful and inclusive spiritual experiences.

Despite these possibilities, adults should be open to other nurturing activities. Adults must remember that the goal is to cultivate a holistic and healthy spirituality in children. Hee Jung Min and Joseph Lynn criticize that mindfulness activities in education are often used as capital for student success rather than for its intended purpose which is to support their spirituality.⁸⁷ They recommended a de-capitalization of mindfulness for it to be truly beneficial in educational settings. Hyde argues that material pursuits that cater to the ego impede the growth of the child's spirituality. This critique serves as a reminder that the goal of nurturing children's

⁸⁵ For a thorough explanation of these practices, see Bhagwan, "Creating Sacred Experiences for Children as Pathways to Healing, Growth and Transformation."

⁸⁶ For Godly play, see Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) and <https://godlyplayfoundation.org>. For embodied prayer, see Yust and Reibel, "Innovations in Children's Spiritual Nurture."

⁸⁷ See Hee Jung Min and Joseph Lynn, "De-Capitalizing Mindfulness in Education," *Critical Sociology* 46, no. 6 (September 2020): 931–46.

spirituality should be for their holistic development. Such awareness helps counter the tendency to produce children poised for academic and economic success, instead of fostering well-rounded individuals.

Relationships

Relationality is recognized as a necessary attribute in the discussion of children's spirituality. Hyde identifies relationality as the foundation of all the characteristics of spirituality, making relationships paramount in nurturing spirituality.⁸⁸ While relationships with other people (I-others) are essential, relationality also encompasses the relationship with oneself (I-Self), with the world (I-world), and with a transcendent other (I-God).⁸⁹ In Christian contexts, this primarily involves the relationship between the child and God. Nye notes that the quality of one's relationships can set the parameters for how people, including children, can relate spiritually.⁹⁰

Cultivating relationality in children involves nurturing their connections with the self, the world around them, and the transcendent. Many aspects of nurturing children's spirituality discussed above through space, body, and time already address these relationships. For instance, creating dedicated spaces for reflection helps children connect with their inner selves and develop a sense of "I-Self." Engaging children in activities that involve exploring nature or participating

⁸⁸ Hyde, *Children and Spirituality*, 166.

⁸⁹ See Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 109. Hay and Nye explicitly used "I-God" to denote the relationship with the transcendent other. However, this can be interpreted broadly to include any transcendent other, allowing for the inclusion of various beliefs.

⁹⁰ Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 51.

in community service fosters their relationship with the world (I-World). Practices such as embodied prayer, mindfulness, and participation in religious rituals deepen their connection with the transcendent (I-God), whether they perceive this as God or another form of higher power. While these dimensions are crucial, this section specifically emphasizes the importance of I-Others—relationships with other people. By focusing on fostering healthy, intimate, and trusting relationships children can experience the values of love, empathy, compassion, and mutual respect. These interpersonal relationships are foundational to their spiritual growth, allowing them to see and experience the divine or transcendent in their interactions with others. Therefore, this section gives important attention to others, ensuring that children develop meaningful connections in all dimensions of their spirituality.

Bhagwan's research emphasizes the importance of situating children within a community's spirituality.⁹¹ A child's spirituality flourishes when they have a sense of belonging and connectedness within a spiritual community. Within these communities, children learn values like love, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and service to others, integrating them into their identities and worldviews.⁹² Although these values can be taught through stories or structured activities, nothing can compare to an experience of these values being lived out by people in the community.

In the community, the crucial role of the adult-child relationship must be emphasized. At home, this involves parents and children. In school, it is between teachers

⁹¹ See Bhagwan, "Creating Sacred Experiences for Children as Pathways to Healing, Growth and Transformation," 231.

⁹² See Jennifer Mata, *Spiritual Experiences in Early Childhood Education: Four Kindergartners, One Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29.

and students. Adults in these relationships are directly responsible for nurturing children's spirituality. Nye's framework for nurturing spirituality emphasizes two key ingredients for relationality: intimacy and trust.⁹³ Nye describes intimacy as a sense of "coming closer," for spirituality thrives in this closeness where delving deeper, taking risks, and pursuing passions is possible.⁹⁴ However, this closeness poses risks, as it makes the child vulnerable to potential misuse of intimacy by adults. This vulnerability may be the reason Nye found it necessary to emphasize trust in the spiritual relationship.⁹⁵ Spiritual relationships between adults and children should be safe and trust-filled, allowing children to be open and vulnerable. Healthy, intimate, and trusting relationships can positively influence the spiritual connections children form with themselves and others.

Karen-Marie Yust, Cathy Ota, and Brendan Hyde utilize Anne Phillips' metaphor of the womb from her study on girls' spirituality to describe the ideal type of relationship between adults and children.⁹⁶ They described the overall role that adults play as "wombing," comprising three different parts: "chorionic companions" who protect, "amniotic companions" who support free exploration, and "placental partners" who foster relationality. The chorion acts as a protective outer membrane for the fetus. As "chorionic companions," adults protect children from external threats to their flourishing and

⁹³ See Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 53–56.

⁹⁴ See Nye, 53.

⁹⁵ See Nye, 54–55.

⁹⁶ See Karen-Marie Yust, Cathy Ota, and Brendan Hyde, "Wombing: Chorionic Companions, Amniotic Companions and Placental Partners," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 18, no. 4 (November 1, 2013): 303–5. For the use of the "womb" as the role of the adult in the child's formation process, see Anne Phillips, *Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood*. (Surry, UK: Ashgate, 2011).

create a safe environment for children to nurture their spirituality.⁹⁷ The amnion, a fluid-filled expandable bag allowing the fetus free movement, symbolizes how adults should let children explore their spirituality freely. “Amniotic companions” support children’s free exploration of their own identity and connectedness to others. Adults must nurture their spirituality, because “a spiritually bereft adult is hard-pressed to provide a fluid environment for the self-discovery tasks” in caring for the child.⁹⁸ The placenta symbolizes the connections and relationships in the child’s life. Children’s spirituality thrives when they experience their interconnectedness with the wider world. “Placental partners” commit to fostering healthy relationships as the baseline for children’s relationships, choosing mutuality over inequality.⁹⁹ In this role, adults are mindful of their control and readily relinquish this control “in favor of mutuality and greater spiritual interrelatedness.”¹⁰⁰ By creating safe, trusting, and mutually respectful environments inside and outside the classroom, Catholic schools can nurture the spiritual lives of all students.

The womb metaphor effectively illustrates the dynamics of relationships when nurturing the spirituality of children. However, this metaphor has its limitations, potentially idealizing adults and not addressing the risks of abuse, overcontrol, or imposition of views on children. This leads to an important theme. Eaude criticizes Nye’s SPIRIT acronym for underplaying the power dynamics in adult-child relationships.¹⁰¹ This may also be a limitation of Hyde’s discussion on

⁹⁷ Yust, Ota, and Hyde, “Wombing,” 303–4.

⁹⁸ Yust, Ota, and Hyde, 304.

⁹⁹ Yust, Ota, and Hyde, 304.

¹⁰⁰ Yust, Ota, and Hyde, 304.

¹⁰¹ See Eaude, “Creating Hospitable Space to Nurture Children’s Spirituality—Possibilities and Dilemmas Associated with Power,” 237.

relationships and even the womb metaphor. Therefore, addressing power dynamics by emphasizing children's agency is crucial in nurturing their spirituality.

Agency

Nurturing spirituality should empower children to cultivate their spirituality with appropriate support from the adults in their lives. This involves letting children exercise agency within healthy adult-child relationships. Recognizing that power dynamics exist in all social relationships, it is important that adults responsibly guide the nurturing of children's spirituality. In this case, there is already an imbalance of power, with adults in a position of power over children.¹⁰² At this juncture, examining Dillen's framework for understanding power dynamics in nurturing spirituality becomes beneficial.¹⁰³ Using Max Weber's broad definition of power, as the "opportunity to impose one's will upon others" or "to influence others in social relations, even if one encounters resistance," she outlined three types of power: "power over," "power within," and "power with," which she applies to nurturing spirituality.¹⁰⁴

"Power within" clearly articulates the goal of nurturing children's spirituality and serves as a guiding principle. Dillen views stimulating the child's inner strength or inner resources as a form of "power within."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² See Eaude, 238.

¹⁰³ See Dillen, "Empowering Children in Religious Education: Rethinking Power Dynamics," 4.

¹⁰⁴ See Dillen, 4; For a consideration of the English translation of Max Weber's definition of power, see Isidor Wallimann, Nicholas Ch. Tatsis, and George V. Zito, "On Max Weber's Definition of Power," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 3 (1977): 231–35.

¹⁰⁵ Dillen, "Empowering Children in Religious Education: Rethinking Power Dynamics," 4.

These inner resources may come in the form of children's capacities for greater consciousness, meaningful connections, and meaning-making. This "power within" embodies children's spiritual agency.¹⁰⁶ Dillen notes that in some religious settings, like those in the Belgian Catholic Church, nurturing spirituality often prioritizes the church or community's needs reducing children to mere potential future members.¹⁰⁷ The "power within" concept restores agency to children, allowing them space and time to develop their spiritual agency. With this agency, the narratives that children create and constantly recreate to make sense of their identity and their relationship with others and the world become possible.¹⁰⁸

"Power with" involves sharing power with children, thereby empowering them. This article exemplifies this approach through discussions on space, time, the body, and relationships. For instance, allowing children to interpret their own experiences demonstrates "power with" in action. While adults provide the space, children have the autonomy to use it as they deem appropriate. In nurturing spirituality, "power with" necessitates collaboration and shared responsibility between adults and children. To use an analogy, adults act both as guides and companions, supporting and guiding while respecting children's agency. Recognizing a child's capabilities, the "power with" approach fosters empowerment and agency, which is essential for spiritual growth.

¹⁰⁶ For some examples of how children exercise a spiritual "power within" or agency in research, see Peter J. Hemming and Nicola Madge, "Researching Children, Youth, and Religion: Identity, Complexity, and Agency," *Childhood*, 2011, 43–45.

¹⁰⁷ Dillen, "Empowering Children in Religious Education: Rethinking Power Dynamics," 5.

¹⁰⁸ Tony Eade, "Revisiting Some Half-Forgotten Ideas on Children's Spirituality," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 28, no. 1 (2023): 26–27.

However, Dillen cautions against shifting “power with” to potentially harmful dynamics, where fellow children or uninvolved adults replace the primary caregiving adult.¹⁰⁹ This is risky for insecure children, who are searching for their spiritual path, or those who are easily influenced by others. In such situations, there needs to be a “power over”—direct influence adults exert over children—to correct misguided ideas or beliefs. Adults must vigilantly monitor instances where “power over” is exercised over children because they will always be present.¹¹⁰ Dillen points to classical teaching methods in religious education as examples of “power over,” where school administrators and teachers control the content to initiate and socialize children into a religious tradition.¹¹¹ However, “power over” is not limited to direct adult-child interactions but can also manifest in prescribed educational content and theological language.

Regardless of its form, when “power over” dominates, it risks reducing children to “not-yet adults” or as incompetent subjects, hindering their spiritual flourishing. This can stifle children’s ‘power within.’ However, “power over” can be protective and necessary, especially in situations where children face vulnerability, like intimidation or bullying. Adults may need to intervene to address problematic spiritual beliefs and practices ingrained in children. Thus, a minimal and thoughtful application of “power over” is recommended.

In Catholic schools, nurturing spirituality should cultivate their “power within,” by balancing “power with” and “power over.” Teachers and administrators can create environments that stimulate children’s inner strengths, foster collaborative relationships, and provide necessary guidance and correction. By respecting

¹⁰⁹ Dillen, 5.

¹¹⁰ Dillen, 5–6.

¹¹¹ Dillen, 6.

children's agency and providing supportive structures, schools can help children nurture their spirituality. This includes creating spaces for reflection, promoting meaningful experiential learning activities, and ensuring that the educational content respects and enhances children's spiritual growth. An awareness and thoughtful balance of the power dynamics in school ensures that children are not only protected but also empowered to grow spiritually.

Conclusion

This article critically engages with contemporary literature on children's spirituality, particularly focusing on nurturing this dimension that can provide relevant insights for Philippine Catholic schools. The analysis underscores the necessity of adopting a broader perspective on spirituality—one that transcends traditional forms and embraces a more holistic understanding that acknowledges children's inherent relational consciousness and capacity for meaning-making. To effectively nurture spirituality, school leaders and teachers must foster environments rich in resources like space, time, bodily engagement, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to exercise agency. These resources enable an educational atmosphere where children can explore spiritual concepts and texts, experience wonder and awe, and engage meaningfully with the transcendent, regardless of their religious backgrounds.

Philippine Catholic schools must also recognize the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, including those from non-Catholic traditions, and incorporate culturally sensitive approaches in their programs. Future directions could include creating collaborative spaces for communal spiritual and theological meaning-making and ensuring that cultural diversity is critically considered at

every stage of efforts toward nurturing spirituality. By embracing this expanded approach, schools can transform traditional educational strategies and policies, making them more adaptive, respectful, and effective in meeting all students' spiritual needs. Such a commitment to inclusivity and cultural sensitivity not only aligns with but also enhances the mission of whole-person formation, enriching the educational journey of every student. By adopting these inclusive practices and recognizing the unique cultural dimensions of spirituality in the Philippines, schools can nurture a generation of students who are academically prepared and spiritually nourished, emphasizing the importance of spirituality as an integral part of holistic education.

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The Kingdom of God in Selected Christian Living Education Modules viewed through Jesus of Nazareth's Vision of the Reign of God

Romela D. Sanga and Ferdinand D. Dagmang

Abstract: This article offers a study of Jesus' Vision of the Reign of God as a foundation for the Christian Living Education Modules. Jesus of Nazareth's ministry during the Roman Empire's rule should be part of existing modules on God's Kingdom as this would clarify the context of discipleship and ministry. Jesus, who lived and proclaimed God's ruling presence, will be better understood and also grasped as a model if he is examined through historically-grounded studies, especially those written by Richard Horsley and other authors who are identified with the 'Christology from below' approach. Horsley's scholarly studies could assist in a more historical rendering of Jesus' vision of the Good News of the Reign of God for today's learners.

Keywords: Jesus of Nazareth • Kingdom of God • Reign of God • Vision • Discipleship • Ministry

Introduction

Jesus of Nazareth's mission was guided by his vision of the Good News of the Reign of God: Life's transformation under God's presence and experienced through "wholesome"¹ relationships in the social,

¹ 'Wholesome' here refers to the biblical concept of *shalom*. "Jesus made people experience, through his ministry, the fulness of shalom, a Hebrew word that means peace, harmony, wholeness, fulfillment, prosperity, welfare, and serenity—signs of God's reign. He said: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (John 14:27). This 'Peace,' shalom, is not just a simple experience of tranquility but an experience of something palpable: healing, forgiving, and breaking bread as a community as felt expressions of compassion and care." Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Culture as

political, economic, cultural, ecological, and cosmic realms. Jesus fulfilled this vision through his ministry that is imbued with compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity with the excluded/outcasts. Through his life, the God of mercy and forgiveness is also proclaimed and revealed.

While the divine is revealed through Jesus, it is also through his proclamation that we see the character of a faithful and committed proclaimer of God—revealing through himself the qualities that his followers, by implication, could emulate and embody. In other words, proclaiming the Kingdom of God also reveals the character of the proclaimer-Jesus whose life inspires personal and communal response to his invitation to care for the poor, discriminated, and excluded.

Being a facilitator for many years, I followed the Christian Living Education (CLE) modules from Grade school, Junior, and Senior High School. I paid special attention to their presentation of the biblical vision of the Reign of God. I examined ten (10) sample CLE modules via Content Analysis² and discovered their emphasis on discipleship—one that expects adherence to the values of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, they lacked the more historically grounded and contextual approach to the study of Jesus, whose vision of the Good News of the Reign of God is concretized through his ministry of healing, table fellowship, reconciliation,

Enabler for SDGs: Learning from Jesus of Nazareth's Vision/Mission," *Journal of Dharma* 46, no. 3 (July-September 2021): 350.

² For the whole process of Content Analysis, see Romela D. Sanga, *Jesus of Nazareth's Vision of the Reign of God in the Works of Richard Horsley: An Appropriation to Revitalize Religious Education Instructions on the Reign of God* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Maryhill School of Theology, 2023), 142-248.

teaching, and prophetic denunciation of oppressive systems, customs, and legalities.³ Since Jesus showed himself, through his life/ministry, as an exemplar of a faithful and committed servant of God, the CLE may have to also offer him as a model, that is, by presenting him as someone who is accessible to imitation in discipleship (cf. “Come follow me.”: Mt 4:19; see also Lk 18:22; Mt 16:24; Mk 1:17; Lk 9:23).

This article will initially examine the data found in the sampled CLE modules in terms of their treatment/communication of the Kingdom of God (or Reign of God⁴) and its proclaimer, Jesus of Nazareth. This is crucial for a critical study meant to enrich the content of modules and thereby improve learning. This step will be followed by a process of scholarly inquiry into the works of Richard Horsley and other scholars who wrote about the

³ See Richard A. Horsley and Tom Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 164; see also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 104; Richard A. Horsley, *Empowering the People: Jesus, Healing, and Exorcism* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), 32-34; Ernest Van Eck, “Interpreting the Parables of the Galilean Jesus: A Social-Scientific Approach,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, South Africa 65, no.1, (16 September. 2009): 310-21; Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 25th-anniversary edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 35-45.

⁴ The Reign of God is a preferred translation of βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ since the Greek word for the kingdom (*basileia*) lies in the Aramaic term *malkut*, which Jesus may have used; the emphasis is on the ruling presence of God. The choice of the phrase “Reign of God” hopes to balance the emphasis on the use of “Kingdom” which may point to a specific territory or refer to an after-life region.

historical Jesus and his vision of the Reign of God.⁵ The goal is for the CLE instructions' improvement through a sound appropriation of the current scholarly literature which is well-grounded in the socio-historical context of Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of the Reign of God. It is hoped that this study will be able to guide CLE Instructors in faithfully following Jesus, whose vision was fulfilled through his caring ministry to the poor, the discriminated, and the excluded of society.

Data from Christian Living Education Modules

Ten modules have been sampled from the Grade school, Junior, and Senior High School Christian Living Education instructional materials from five schools in the National Capital Region, also known as Metropolitan Manila, the capital region of the Philippines. The following are the data culled from the modules' presentation of the topic of the 'Kingdom of God':

Module #1: This module emphasizes that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, spread worldwide. It was proclaimed and established by Jesus. It is the central Message of the Gospel and communicated through the parables. Its invisible power changes the lives of people. It grows like a seed through the Church as the Holy Spirit ensures its

⁵ See Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, chapters 6-12; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 93-102; Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 23-36; Nicholas Perrin and Jonathan Lunde, eds. *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 54-114; Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God": Jesus and Children," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 469-480.

growth. It is different from the human realm as God's kingdom lasts forever.

Module #2: The Kingdom of God is in the heart and center of Jesus of Nazareth's mission and ministry on earth. He was called the Messiah-King, who served and freed the people from sin. He used the parables to establish the truths about the Kingdom of God which grows, bears fruits, and is the most valuable treasure one could have in life. God's Kingdom is for all of us, and we experience it here on Earth. The Church is the seed, sign, and instrument of the Kingdom of God.

Module #3: The Beatitudes taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount pointed out the true happiness and blessings that can only be found in God. They are the center of Jesus' teaching, the footpath to eternal life. They contain the values/qualities that enable one to detach oneself from worldly possessions and center on attitudes that will make one inherit the Kingdom of God. They require doing good and relating to one another as brothers and sisters. In Jesus' Beatitudes, the poor and the powerless are the main beneficiaries of his blessings.

Module #4: The Good News of the Kingdom of God is the center of Jesus' teaching and preaching. Jesus made use of parables to communicate God's presence in ordinary life. The Kingdom of God grows and bears fruits like a seed through many good acts shared with others. The Kingdom of God offers a state of love, peace, and joy. It is a gift and a powerful symbol of God's active presence among His people.

Module #5: The Beatitudes are spiritual and moral rules to be followed to attain the blessings of true happiness in God. One must work for this gift by doing something good for others, such as serving and helping the sick, poor, oppressed, and unfortunate. The Beatitudes illustrate the call to live the essential qualities, attitudes, and values, such as justice, peace, mercy, and love to be truly happy.

To be truly happy, we must serve and help others, especially the vulnerable. The values upheld by the Beatitudes are the opposite of worldly standards.

Module #6: Jesus exemplified the task of a prophet by proclaiming the Word of God, performing signs and wonders, and suffering a martyr's fate. Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Repentance and conversion are needed to enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a dynamic symbol of God's active presence among His people. Becoming like little Children was stressed for inclusion in God's Kingdom.

Module #7: The content of the Good News of the Kingdom of God was presented under the Sacrament of Confirmation using parables. The Kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus, the Messiah, through his words and deeds. It is a gift of salvation to all nations. It is in the process of being "already here" with Jesus' saving presence. It will fully come when the pilgrim Church meets the demands of repentance, conversion, and response in faith, hope, and living out the values of justice, freedom, peace, forgiveness, and love. It triumphs when God reigns in people's hearts, minds, and wills. For the many who have not heard, accepted, and lived the Good News, the Kingdom of God is already here but not yet fully established. The Church, distinct from other societies, is the seed, sign, represent, and instrument of the coming of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not a political kingdom but a condition where God reigns in people's hearts, minds, and wills.

Module #8: Jesus, as the Messiah, proclaimed God's Kingdom in action through His Healing, Exorcism, Restoring life, and Nature Miracles. Through the healing ministry, Jesus addressed the needs of the people and relieved their physical suffering and illnesses, signs of God's unconditional love and forgiveness. For healing to take place, faith is necessary.

Module #9: The Beatitudes were Jesus' teachings to

achieve the secret to a happy and blessed life. They contain the values and attitudes that Jesus challenged the people to adopt and live a life centered on God and one's neighbors. The Blessings of the Kingdom are promised to the poor and powerless. The Kingdom's blessings were implied and promised to those who went beyond the external legal and customary observances.

Module #10: Jesus' earthly mission came from God the Father. God's Kingdom is not the other world or the salvation of the soul attained once we die. It is present here and now amid people. It is a Kingdom that emphasizes justice and liberation for the poor and freedom for the oppressed. It brings health, welfare, well-being, and life, to the people on earth, as a foretaste of the Second Coming that is yet to come. Jesus' passion and death resulted from his ministry that proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, which led him to conflict with the authorities. Salvation would thus refer to a quality of life, a life of total well-being. It is not only the soul's after-life salvation but also the coming of health, justice, and liberation.

Discussion

All modules affirm the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' message found in the Scriptures. It is the social vision of Jesus as the prophet, healer, miracle worker, preacher, and teacher (proclaimer), while Jesus himself is also proclaimed as the Lord, messiah-King, and Christ. The titles of prophet, healer, miracle worker, preacher, and teacher refer to a historical person engaged in ministry to communities; the titles of Lord, messiah-King, and Christ are more identified with the apostolic proclamation of the salvific Christ—a 'faith-knowledge' that suggests beyond the historic significance for the present. The modules, however, do not elaborate on the connection between the historical and the transcendental characterizations of Jesus.

Five modules (numbers 1, 3, 6, 7, and 9) affirmed the nature of the Kingdom of God as a promise—that is, the fullness of life or the ‘not yet’ as eternal life, being opposed to the ‘already here’ which faithful Christians or the Church would be able to experience through ethical observances in line with the challenge of Jesus in the parables and the Beatitudes. Modules #3 and #7 present this double meaning of the ‘already here’ working in the ‘present age’ and the ‘not yet’ which is the ‘age to come’ that points to the Kingdom as slowly working toward ultimate fulfillment and it is not radically breaking through human history to bring perfect bliss in the world. Modules #5, #9, and #10 dispense with the tension between the ‘already here’ and the ‘not yet’ by stressing the here-and-now blessings promised to the poor, powerless, and vulnerable. Module #2 distinctly emphasizes the Church as the instrument of the Kingdom of God while Module #4 puts great emphasis on the meaning of the Kingdom of God as a ‘this-world’ divine presence. Module #2’s church as an instrument of God would thus complement #4’s understanding of the divine presence in this world. Module #7 stands out as the most apolitical by stressing the meaning of the Kingdom of God as God’s reign in the hearts, minds, and wills of people—such reign is not political; presumably, an intellectual and moral force that affects the behavior of people, opening themselves up to the promise of eternal salvation.

The Kingdom of God as the symbol of God’s presence was shown to be communicated by Jesus, mainly via his parables, teachings about the Beatitudes, and through his ministry of healing, exorcism, and miracle works. While the prophetic vision aspect of the meaning of the Kingdom of God is not absent in the modules, it is also being identified with blessings (Beatitudes) and the other-worldly gift of the fullness of life (salvation),

especially for the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable. Such blessings and salvation have been fulfilled in and through the person of Jesus.

The modules all took into account the Kingdom of God's historical (task) and ultimate (promise) dimensions which also implied some demands (internalizing values and attitudes) for it to be realized in one's life and our midst. However, some modules also emphasize detachment from this-worldly values and pursuits as well as putting trust in a merciful and forgiving God. This is further connected with the promise of the Kingdom as Eternity, a place where inclusion is assured for those who practice spiritual and moral rules. Other-worldly rewards await those who become like little children.

The "other-worldly" object of reward and promise is more pronounced in how most of the modules present the Kingdom of God. Dovetailing with this object of reward is the believer's posture of faith expressed through doing good for others as well as devotion and trust in the divine bestowal of saving grace. The challenge of following Jesus' example as a discipleship model tends to be expressed in an apolitical manner which is inconsistent with a more politically-stirring ministry of Jesus himself. Thus, the more pious stance of dependence and trust in a God tends to overlook the call to participate in the project of making present the Kingdom as a demanding form of discipleship, that is involved in the struggle against socio-historical forms of evil (oppressive marginalization, racism, bigotry, dehumanizing exploitation of workers, degradation of the environment, etc.). Moreover, a more interiorized understanding of the Kingdom (reigning in hearts and minds) also reinforces the lack of focus on the social cost of discipleship.

A discipleship that is pulled by the more apolitical gesture of devotional and pious practices wired to the promise of grace may call to mind Dietrich Bonhoeffer's

words:

Cheap Grace is the deadly enemy of our church.... It is grace without price: grace without cost!... Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine ... an intellectual assent ... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner ... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁶

A leaning toward the “transcendent” identity of Jesus, affirmed as Christ, and a glossing over of the identity of the historical Jesus can be gleaned from the majority of the Modules (especially numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). It is noticeable that Modules 5, 9, and 10 refrained from defining the Christ-identity and emphasized the historical Jesus (a healer, ‘miracle-worker’, minister to sinners) who was intent on carrying out his mission to make present the vision of the Kingdom of God. In other words, the Jesus proclaimed is the one who realized through his words and deeds the vision that brought about justice and liberation for the poor and oppressed. Despite its statement that the ministry of Jesus foretastes the Second Coming, the brand of his justice and liberation is qualified to bring historical wholeness, integral well-being, and welfare. This marks the meaning of the kingdom of God as well-grounded in history, one that belongs to the discourse of

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster ebook, 2012), part I, chapter 1.

Low Christologies⁷ that claim Jesus' presence as a touch of the divine. In turn, we humans become aware of our own being in the presence of the mediator who bridges the Christ of faith.

Nevertheless, the more historical treatment of Jesus' ministry to the poor is either absent or overlooked in Modules 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. This does not mean, however, that such modules are teaching erroneous knowledge. They are teaching what we may call the perspectival emphasis on the other-worldly promise of the Kingdom of God; in the process, they tend to play down the this-world, grounded, meaning that communicates the sensuous acts of care and mercy that aid and facilitate the observable transformation and responses of people. Most of the modules do not fail to communicate the language of compassion or care—yet, they are presented to students as formal concepts for intellectual reception, seemingly enough to emphasize the cost of discipleship. By not pointing out performance through the prophetic praxis of Jesus as more basic, they tend to bring to mind the importance of intellectual conversion and the primacy of devotion that sends one to the promised other-world via Christ's redemptive sacrifice. The performance dimension of faith involved in transforming praxis is not given its most basic, foundational, importance; thus, we see Modules 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 implicitly favoring the illuminative and

⁷ The historical Jesus is the focus of Low Christologies or Christologies from below. Such studies begin with Jesus of Nazareth, considered a man, and then move on to consider his theological identity, his significance, and his place in the promise of divine salvation. See Wesley J. Wildman, "Basic Christological Distinctions," *Theology Today* 64, no. 3 (2007): 287.

fiducial dimensions of religion.⁸

We can observe a tension between the power of linguistic concepts that require intellectual assent and the force of foundational touch that calls for embodied involvement. This could be further discussed via the tension between the sense of sight with its lead toward the deduction of ideas, on the one hand, and that of the sense of touch that grounds every moment of thought, on the other hand.

The sense of sight may be regarded as superior as it makes it possible for humans to rise above the other senses that serve lower desires. Sight arrives at the transcendent, expressing one's highest ability to rationalize and eventually contemplate in full trust that which it defines as eternal. This could be a sweeping hierarchy that overlooks the sense of touch which is most basic as it makes thought possible, as well as love, kindness, and compassion. In tenderly touching others, we are not perched on a higher position of control and dominion that is implied in transcendental perception. We are active as well as passive when we are both traversing and get traversed by the other's sensible presence. This is a dialogical relationship with other beings, even expressing respect for particularities and singularities. We communicate and respond to the world that perhaps suffers or experiences joy and hope. We are not detached from all of these like the incarnate Word cannot but be vulnerable to tactile communications. The sense of sight may take the stance of domination as the gaze above what can be touched, leading toward

⁸ For a discussion on the aspects of faith (devotion/trust, enlightenment, and ethical performance), see Avery Dulles, "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in John C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, 10-46, especially 23-31 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1977).

abstractions, conceptual formulations, and symbolic representations. This has the danger of losing degrees of touch and vulnerability. The prison structure of the panopticon in strategic discipline and punishment also evokes a similar sense of control and dominion that cannot be the gesture that Jesus would have taken and cannot be that since he journeyed through paths and spaces of compassion. However, a pious devotion to Jesus may develop among believers and also become a way of putting our unconditional trust in the divine. This could pronounce dependence and develop a total submission to God which gives way to a certain definition of faith. Both the intellectual assent and gesture of dependence (illuminative and fiducial aspects) do not, however, constitute the more concrete and embodied response to the call to participate in the mission of Jesus (“Come, follow me.” Mk 4:19; “For I was hungry and you gave me food...” Mt. 25:35ff; “Go and do likewise.” Lk 10:37). If such sensuous presence and ministrations cannot be fully expressed or strongly evoked via abstractions and pious devotions, then Jesus' identity and prophetic ministry become muddled or fetishized in doctrines and piety. It seems that it is via his historical involvement (performance aspect of faith) that we may be able to apprehend his relevance to the so-called history of salvation.

Consequently, a historical approach to the study of the kind of ministry that Jesus extended to the poor needs the proper account of the dynamics related to power, prestige, alliances, and wealth distribution within the socio-historical context of poverty and oppression. This is necessary to show the more documented situation of suffering experienced by the poor (missing in most modules) which is important in making more sense of Jesus' emphasis on compassion (and mercy) for the concrete (not imagined) needy and socially excluded

individuals—giving way to a better understanding of the ministry of care and the proper weighing up of the cost of discipleship.

Let us now turn to some studies, especially those of Richard Horsley, that reveal the importance and significance of examining and understanding the historical Jesus and his vision of the Reign of God.

Jesus' Vision of the Reign of God

“The teaching and preaching of Jesus centered on the Kingdom of God, dynamic symbol of God’s active presence among His people.”⁹ Jesus proclaimed this ruling presence of God through his ministry that aims at the renewal of the people within the Israelite tradition and fulfillment of their hopes for a new deliverance. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Reign of God¹⁰ is the central theme of Jesus’ preaching.¹¹ It is at the heart of Jesus’ mission

⁹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, new ed. (Word & Life Publications: Manila Philippines, 1997), 481. See Christopher D. Marshall, *Kingdom Come: The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 41-57.

¹⁰ The Reign of God is a better translation of βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ since the Greek word for the kingdom (*basileia*) lies in the Aramaic term *malkut*, which Jesus may have used. *Malkut* refers primarily to authority, reign, or the exercise of sovereign power and not to a geographical area or realm nor the people inhabiting the realm; the emphasis is on the ruling presence of God. The idea is better conveyed in English by an expression such as kingship, rule, sovereignty, or reign. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2816; https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Kingdom_of_God#:~:text=The%20Kingdom%20of%20God%20or,message%20in%20the%20synoptic%20Gospels.

¹¹ Edward Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus: A Guide to the Four Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press,

and ministry. In John's Gospel, it is exemplified in the "bold portrayal of Jesus as "the Messiah" leading the people in renewal and resistance, which is a distinctive view among the Gospels."¹² In the epistles of Paul, "Jesus is the center of God's kingdom plan and one must believe in Him to inherit the kingdom."¹³

Richard Horsley's works, which display an ideal scholarly rigor and cover a broad range of New Testament topics, converge on the core vision of Jesus of Nazareth. Horsley underscores the landscape of Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom, a mission that encompassed the religious, political, and socio-economic realms. He has opted for a historical approach for a grounded understanding and fitting interpretation of the historical Jesus who emphasized Israel's renewal of covenantal loyalty with God.¹⁴

2011), 36. See Michael John Hooton, *Four Gospels, One Christ: The Public Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

¹² Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 154.

¹³ Michael J. Vlach, "The Kingdom of God in Paul's Epistles," *Masters Seminary Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 59, <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/tmsj26e.pdf>.

¹⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003), 98. See Donald B Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2018), 18-29, 162; Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 57-81; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 93-102; Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 23-36; Nicholas Perrin and Jonathan Lunde, eds. *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 54-114.

Horsley's Interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth's Vision

Jesus of Nazareth's ministry was carried out both in ancient Palestine and, by implication, in the Roman Empire. He was a figure not isolated from the struggles and sufferings of the people of Israel under the Roman powers.¹⁵

According to Horsley, Jesus was interpreted and depoliticized by our society. He "has been reduced to merely a religious figure."¹⁶ As a result of modernity's habit of separating state and religion as well as dividing the lifeworld concerns into separate academic disciplines' concentrations (economics, politics, religion, etc.), Jesus became isolated from his social relevance, political-economic relationships, and importance in the Roman Empire context. Jesus was viewed "as an individual figure independent of the social relations in which he was embedded, dealt mainly with other individuals, not with social groups and political institutions."¹⁷ Jesus' teachings were assumed like separated or floating utterances. In effect, Jesus' ministry tended to be disconnected from the historical conditions of life under the Roman Empire.

Horsley constantly proposed interpreting the historical Jesus' mission along the fundamental societal division between rulers and ruled to comprehend the circumstances in which the early Jesus ministry formed and developed. He encouraged interpreters to be mindful of the political-economic structure of Israelite peoples to appreciate Jesus' response and resistance to various

¹⁵ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7. See Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 25.

oppressive forces. He underscored that it is essential to cast aside the modern inference about the separation of religion from political-economic affairs. He further stressed that the immediate Palestinian context of Jesus' mission was highly politicized, filled with periodic widespread unrest and protests, movements, and outright revolts against the imperial order that the Romans had imposed. Jesus must be appreciated through his constant social interaction with people who, in response, reciprocate by embracing and supporting his ministry.

Clarifying the Context of the Poor in Ancient Palestine

Horsley's works were mindful of the Roman Empire's rule characterized by persecutions, executions (crucifixion),¹⁸ repression, cultural hegemony, patronage at the expense of the peripheries, and the collaborations of the religious and local leaders who were in power.

It can be granted that the people welcomed the new Roman imperial order that enabled them to be relieved from more than a decade of empire-wide civil war between rival warlords. Indeed, this may have given them a sense of hope, peace, and prosperity, fulfilling the

¹⁸ See Woodrow Michael Kroll, *Roman Crucifixion and the Death of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 44-64; Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 7ff.; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 4: Law and Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 13-14; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 28-30; Richard A. Horsley, "The Death of Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluation of the State of Current Research*, Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds. (Leiden: Brill (1994), 395-422.

hopes and longings of all humankind.¹⁹ Nevertheless, a vast majority of people who were now under the Roman imperial order also meant economic and political (even religious) subjection.²⁰

Octavian, the acclaimed world Savior, placed the Roman state, senate, and people under his power. He assumed the majestic new name, Augustus Caesar. His reign ensured the boundaries of the Roman Empire as the boundaries of the earth. He ruled his kingdom under the influence of his imperial political-military power as he was subjecting the people he conquered to his political agenda. Roman leaders under his empire imposed fear and conformity. Coercion and persuasion among the masses were their chief means of social control, even crucifying subjects who dared to resist Roman rule.²¹

Augustus' empire was overwhelming as its power was not only meant to maintain order but also to threaten and dominate all aspects of the conquered peoples' lives. The

¹⁹ Peter Astbury Brunt and J.M. Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 35. See Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 22.

²⁰ Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiah: Popular Movement in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc., 1985), 45.

²¹ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins Press, 2007), 105. See also, John Storey, ed., *Livy, History of Rome I: A Selection* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 4-6; Katharine Radice and Roland Mayer, eds. *Tacitus Annals I: A Selection* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 2-10; Brunt and Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 12-31; Jennifer Wright Knust, "Paul and Politics of Virtue and Vice," in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 161; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 22; Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 17.

domination compounded the flow of resources from conquered peoples and provinces consequently leading to or exacerbating further the massive poverty of communities and villages.²² Most of the inhabitants under Roman imperialism were urban poor folks who lived between survival and crisis levels. Poverty under Roman imperialism became a way of life for most peasant societies.²³

Horsley's works provided the landscape of how the Roman reconquests were more violent and destructive than the initial conquest.²⁴ The siphoning of resources from subjugated peoples and provinces for the imperial metropolis compounded the wealth accumulation of Rome. The empire boosted military reconquests, demand for tribute, and imposition of client rulers among their dominated populace. The reluctance or delayed contribution to the tribute resulted in being sold and enslaved. The varied violence and exploitation, such as the destruction of villages, killing, enslavement, and the like, brought individual and communal suffering and

²² Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 3 (2004): 323-61; Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 17-36.

²³ For a more nuanced study, see Bruce W. Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 3 (2009): 243-278, doi: 10.1177/0142064X08101524; see also Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

²⁴ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 20. See also Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Frankfurt, Germany: BoD—Books on Demand, 2018), 961-964.

trauma to the people in the dominated villages.²⁵

“Compounding the impact of imperial violence, the drain of economic resources from villagers by the demands for tribute, taxes, and tithes by multiple layers of rulers led to irrecoverable indebtedness, loss of land, and resulting to the disintegration of families and village communities.”²⁶ To survive their daily lives, villagers would borrow money at high interest rates. Ultimately, they lose control of their ancestral lands as payment to their creditors. The wealthy and powerful could bring villagers under their control to exact additional revenues and even take control over their land.

Rome’s elite (in terms of power, wealth, and status) guaranteed hegemony over the surrounding territories with their imposing buildings displayed in every city. Their oppressive authority and dominance delivered an image of peace and an ordered state, popularly known as the Pax Romana.

The hegemonic Roman rule led to generalized oppression. As subjected peoples, the peasants and

²⁵ See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 91; Anthony Keddie, *Class and Power in Roman Palestine: The Socio-Economic Setting of Judaism and Christian Origins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111-132.

²⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine*, 90. See Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 80; Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 140; Rollin A. Ramsaran, “Resisting Imperial Domination and Influence: Paul’s Apocalyptic Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians,” in Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2004), 89-101; Neil Elliot, “Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda,” in Horsley, ed. *Paul and Empire*, 184-204.

villagers became powerless.²⁷ Horsley also emphasized how the Roman emperor's political power was embedded in religious temples, shrines, images, sacrifices, and festivals, aside from the armies, taxes, and administrative apparatus.²⁸ Such was the context of Jesus' ministry.

Clarifying the Nature of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus' ministry was carried out not isolated from the struggles and sufferings of the people of Israel under the Roman powers.²⁹ It is rooted in his dedication and commitment to people experiencing poverty and oppression. He also posed a prophetic challenge against the imperial power and its local clients and temple collaborators. Horsley illuminated Jesus' ministry against the background of the social challenges and transformations needed to deal with a world reeling under a hegemonic rule. He consistently portrayed how Jesus saw and felt the suffering of God's people. He is an inseparably political-economic religious agent of justice and peace in the lives of many Israelites under Roman imperialism. For Horsley, Jesus dealt with the devastating effects of imperial violence and economic exploitation.³⁰

Jesus' mission has rejuvenated the people's Israelite tradition of community spirit of caring and support

²⁷ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 20ff; see also, Keddie *Class and power in Roman Palestine: The Socio-Economic Setting of Judaism and Christian Origins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111-132.

²⁸ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 23; Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 6.

²⁹ Horsley, *Empowering the People*, 447-86.

³⁰ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 104; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 106-8; Horsley, *Empowering the People*, 32-34.

within the villages.³¹ Jesus made God's presence on the side of those who do not have honor or place and are shamed or excluded by society as poor, sinners, unclean, and illiterate. Jesus' company with them provided hope in their desperate condition. He invited them to participate in mutual community support and cooperation to address the problem of family and community disintegration.³²

Horsley underlines that, in contrast to Roman imperialism, Jesus pronounced the vitality of ensuring the socio-economic needs of persons and respecting the dignity of every individual. He lived and proclaimed the nobility and essentiality of generosity, cooperation, and mutual sharing of resources. Jesus' healing and exorcism also offered hope to people.³³ He delivered them from the "ugly underside of the Pax Romana."³⁴ His heart belonged to the bottom of the social ladder, whose lives are degraded because of the primacy of money, honor, power, and exclusive friendships or narrow solidarities.

Jesus showered the lowly with God's goodness, mercy, and compassion. He showed everyone his inclusive compassion so that, by his example, others would do the same. To overcome the embedded stigma among outcasts

³¹ Richard A. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets of Old: Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July, 1985): 452.

³² Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Society of Biblical Literature 2004), 73.

³³ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 164; see also Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 35-45.

³⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 106. See Richard A. Horsley, "Centralization of Political-Economic Power and the Generation of Poverty: The Mission of Jesus," *Journal of Religion & Society Supplementary Series* no. 10 (2014): 83-103.

of society, he embodied his message of sincere empathy with the suffering people.³⁵

Clarifying the Meaning of the Kingdom of God

Horsley showed that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God is centered on the values identified with God's presence as taught and lived by Jesus himself. It is a vision of God's presence that nurtures relationships in building community and fostering social awareness, commitment, and active involvement in rejecting and eradicating any forms of oppression and suffering. It also facilitates an inclusive community spirit wherein everyone is motivated to respond as brothers and sisters under the direct rule of God. It is a life under God's presence that aims to reverse the emperor's reign.

For Horsley, Jesus' mission is realized when God is recognized as the real sovereign. As the true savior of the world, Jesus contrasts sharply with the acclaimed savior-lord of the ruling empire, who reigned over people out of fear and domination. Jesus mediates God's forgiveness of sins in contrast to the temple-based system³⁶ that emphasizes sin-transgression to enhance motivation for recourse to purification rituals required by the temple. As the true savior, Jesus' mode of ministry symbolized his program of opposition to the imperial order. Jesus' presence and ministry, including his martyrdom, became the concrete expression of God's reign.

³⁵ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 34-43. See Jon Sobrino, "Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context: Compassion, Hope, and Following the Light of the Cross," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 437-460.

³⁶ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 3: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 639-40. See Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, 73.

In Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God, he inspired the people to free their hearts from greed and self-seeking. He encouraged them to love and respect others by being just, cooperative, and in solidarity with people in need. Jesus reversed the enslaving and corrupting power of the empire leaders and their local cohorts. He inspired them to place their trust in God's goodness and rely not upon property, honor, exclusive friendships/solidarities, and power.³⁷

Historic Significance and Implications for Discipleship and Ministry

If Jesus would be considered (assumed) as a model of liberating ministry and one who inspires and makes possible an ideal quality of personal or communal life, it requires delving into his historical character—a historical model of virtue who can be imitated and not just piously worshipped. Although his historical actions and pronouncements cannot be separated from his identity as a messiah or savior-Lord, Jesus is a historical figure who deserves to be regarded as an example of virtue or a paragon of noble character for humanity. One cannot just assume to know his human character without placing him right in historical situations that are two millennia detached from us.

A clear and factual understanding of the situation of suffering experienced by the poor is indispensable to help in making more sense of Jesus' emphasis on compassion (and mercy) for the needy and excluded—giving way to a

³⁷ Richard A. Horsley, "You Shall Not Bow Down and Serve Them: Economic Justice in the Bible," *A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69, no. 4 (2015): 415-431. See Richard Horsley, "Popular Prophetic Movements at the Time of Jesus: Their Principal Features and Social Origins," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 8 (1986): 3-27.

ministry of care (cf. the caring gestures of the Good Samaritan as the neighbor to the needy).³⁸ Questions about the actual situation of suffering experienced by the poor need the data provided by the sociological and historical sciences about the poor's condition under the Roman Empire with its lackeys in Israel. Jesus' compassion for the poor (suffering from material and sociological poverty) cannot just be imagined through the brief and general information provided by the biblical texts. The historical conditions of the poor's sufferings during Jesus' time are important information for comparing and contrasting today's experiences of human suffering that also evoke compassion. There has to be some factual data that would show the extent of poverty, domination, exclusion, and discrimination observed by Jesus and gripped his deep sense of compassion.

One thing to remember is that Jesus' ministry about the Good News of the Kingdom of God carries with it an anti-Empire message with its implications, among others, for the proper exercise of power as well as the critical evaluation of prestige, alliances, and wealth distribution. During the time of Jesus, the Emperor proclaimed himself as the Good News and the Son of God. Thus, for Jesus to concretize his vision of the Kingdom of God is also to form a gesture that directly goes against the oppressive imperial claims. Knowing this would

³⁸ See Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "The Good Samaritan Parable and Helping Behavior Narratives in Emergency Situations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of Mutual Illumination," *Louvain Studies* 46, no. 2 (2023): 191-212. See also, Cecilia Wassen, "Jesus' Table Fellowship with 'Toll Collectors and Sinners,'" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14, no. 137 (2016): 137-157; Johanon Flusser, *The Rabbinic Parables and Jesus the Parable Teller* (ebook edition), translated by Timothy Keiderling (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers/Hendrickson Publishers, 2024), 112ff.

imply a kind of present-day ministry that should also go against today's empires that dominate or overpower life-worlds and peoples.

Various studies have failed to delve deeper into specific deep-structural causes of the poor's suffering during Jesus' time. The works of Horsley have assisted us in clarifying the causes and nature of such suffering. These also aided in clarifying the nature of the ministry of compassionate care as having a transcendent character for it announces the presence of God. This present study, aided by Horsley and other authors, makes us aware that discipleship and the Kingdom of God are not only talking about the ministry of caring but also about the place of the divine taking place on the ground and in the agency of people. The divine, therefore, moves in various places at all times when people become neighbors to their fellow and thereby proclaim the Reign of God.

Conclusion

The proclamation of God's Reign is the fundamental theme of Jesus' mission throughout his public ministry. The vision of God's Reign is heard, lived, and shared in the community that brings peace and order to all things and all humanity. Christian Living Education modules must be connected to and revitalized in Jesus' vision of God the Father's Reign and to make it the heart of the CLE modules/curriculum. To communicate this goal and hope, returning to the historical Jesus of Nazareth during Ancient Palestine's subjugation under the Roman Empire is key to rejuvenating the CLE curriculum especially its insistence on discipleship or imitation of the ways of Jesus. The learner's faith journey will be enlightened further on how Jesus perfectly embodied, modeled, and communicated his vision. Engaging the learning activities in CLE with the historical condition of

life in Jesus' time will uplift the learners to open their eyes, minds, and hearts to the challenges of their generation.

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A Tribute to José M. de Mesa

Filipino, Theologian, Friend: Celebrating his Life, Remembering his Genius, Cherishing his Memory¹

by Stephen Bevans

Introduction

We gather here today to remember and celebrate the life of a truly great man, José M. de Mesa. Joe, who died three years ago today on April 15, 2021, was a true Filipino, a brilliant and creative theologian, and a faithful friend—a faithful friend and more to his wife Yvonne, their children Dottie, Njel, and Rissa, to many if not all of you gathered here, and—since 1988—to me.

For the last three months or so I have immersed myself in Joe'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 revealed once more to me his *kagandahang loob*, his beautiful inner self that Yvonne, his children, and his friends recognized and loved. I hope and pray that my words this morning will do some small justice to Joe's life—so well lived, and so soon taken from us.

As my title indicates and to which I have already alluded, my reflections will have three parts, although they are all 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

¹ This is the text of a talk given at a conference to honor the memory and work of José de Mesa. The conference was held on April 15, 2024, the third anniversary of his death. It was organized by Joe's wife, Yvonne, assisted by her three children: Dottie, Njel, and Rissa.

Christian faith, and imagined and constructed his theology. Then, in the second part, I'll try to bring together several key themes of his theology. Finally, I will reflect personally on Joe's and my friendship, hoping that in these personal reflections, all of you might experience a sacrament—what Joe called *bakas*—of your love and friendship with Joe. 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 today.

José de Mesa as Filipino: Celebrating His Life

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* rather than mere *pag-ibig*, “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 and which made me proud of belonging to it. Experiencing ‘the Holy’ in and through the ‘burning bush’ of the culture brought me to a deeper appreciation

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.

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*, pilgrimages to Mount Banahaw, participating in the rituals and processions of *Semana Santa*, celebrating *Simbang Gabi*, and sharing the *Noche Buena* as a family after Christmas midnight Mass, the rich theology of the *Mahal na Pasyon*—although sometimes laced with an anti-Semitism that needs to be recognized and purified—and the consolation of kissing, touching, and wiping a statue like the *Santo Niño* of Cebu or the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. These practices and many more made up the “body language” and *pagpapadama* of Joe’s faith. These important practices and rituals, Joe recognized, are what made him fully human, fully Christian, and fully Filipino.⁴

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.”⁵ He offers three “interrelated tasks” for inculturation: a recognition that any culture is relative to its particular time and

³ José M. De Mesa and David Jonathan Y. Bayot, “Introduction,” *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,” in *A Theological Reader*, 507; Dennis T. González, ed. *José de Mesa’s Novena De Gallo: Paghahanda sa Araw ng Pasko sa Tahanan*, translated by Yvonne F. de Mesa (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2022).

⁵ José M. de Mesa, “Hermeneutics of Appreciation: Approach and Methodology,” in *A Theological Reader*, 121, 137, 158.

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 to use 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."⁶

Joe explained in his introductory conversation with Jonathan Bayot in *A Theological Reader* 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 Ilocano or Cebuano—might feel uncomfortable at first. Let's just experiment, he said, and if the students didn't fully understand 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*' and '*mas nadama ko ang kurso*.'" They not only *understood* better; they *felt* that they understood. Using the Tagalog language spoke more to the students than English ever could have.⁷ "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."⁸ 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

⁶ De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 15.

⁷ De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader* 20

⁸ De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader* 15-16.

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.”⁹

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.

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.”¹⁰ 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 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

⁹ De Mesa and Bayot, “Introduction,” *A Theological Reader* 20.

¹⁰ José M. de Mesa, “Preface,” *A Theological Reader*, vii.

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.¹¹ It 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*."¹² 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 meaningfully in Filipino context of the Word, Jesus, and the deepest, mysterious nature of a person (*loob*) captures in a particularly rich and Filipino way the Holy Mystery who is the Father.¹³ Joe's knowledge of the tradition could show how the received tradition can be "relativized" so that the riches of Filipino culture and the Tagalog language could be "destigmatized and revalued."¹⁴

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*,

¹¹ José M. de Mesa, "The *Mysterion* Which is Marriage: A Vision for Marital Life," in *A Theological Reader*, 215-238.

¹² José M. de Mesa, "*Bakas*: Retrieving the Sense of Sacramentality in the Ordinary," *A Theological Reader*, 465-502.

¹³ José M. de Mesa, *Adequate, But Not Enough: A Filipino Reflection on the Triune God* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2018).

¹⁴ De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 15.

kagandahang-loob, and *ginhawa*. I've already referred to the first two. A brief reflection on each of these will reveal, I think, Joe's theological genius. Because it is a true genius, however, I would argue that Joe's theology not only illuminates the tradition for Filipinos. His reflections go beyond his 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 faith and helped me articulate my faith better in my theology. Joe spoke about this latter dynamic as "intertraditionality."¹⁵

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*, as of course you know, means "feeling" in English, but Joe would rather translate it as a "way of experiencing."¹⁶ Joe was convinced that this is the way that Filipinos know the world, and know their faith. Rather than have 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 cognition and feeling, where to know is to feel and to feel is to truly know." Joe compares *pagdama* with St. John Henry Newman's "illative sense."¹⁷

Pagdama is the soul of Filipino popular religion, a

¹⁵ De Mesa, "Bakas," *A Theological Reader*, 493-94; "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 505-506.

¹⁶ De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 508. Joe also reflects briefly on *pagdama* in his essay "Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology," *A Theological Reader*, 80-83.

¹⁷ De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 508.

true *locus theologicus* or theological source for Filipinos, to allude to a statement by Pope Francis.¹⁸ "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."¹⁹ 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, but an affective trust, an offering of the heart. Faith is not so much believing statements in a catechism, but 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."²⁰ Recognizing the centrality of *pagdama* to

¹⁸ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 126.

¹⁹ De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 510-11.

²⁰ 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.

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, heightening our capacity for discernment in complex ethical situations, and 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."²¹

I think Joe was right on the money here. Interestingly, last November Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter entitled *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, which I have translated as "In Order to Move Theology Forward." Francis calls for a new way of doing theology, based on a new way of thinking, more focused on wisdom and spirituality than logic and reason. He calls 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 truly 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 . . ."²²

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

²¹ De Mesa, "Feeling as Solidarity," *A Theological Reader*, 511.

²² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *motu proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, 7. My translation.

Kagandahang-Loob

One of the most beautiful of 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."²³

Loob is a relational concept. An evil person is said to be of "*masamang loob*," but "a good person is said to be of *magandang loob* (literally, a beautiful inner self) or alternatively of "*mabuting loob*" (literally, a good inner self) because he/she generally relates well and positively to others."²⁴ 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."²⁵

Joe describes *kagandahang-loob* as having several characteristics. It points to the fact that a person can only be known by her or his relationships with 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 other-oriented. His or her

²³ José M. de Mesa, "Jesus: The Revelation of God's *Kagandahang Loob*," *A Theological Reader*, 302.

²⁴ De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303.

²⁵ De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303.

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.²⁶

In the essay from which I have been quoting, 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.²⁷ 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."²⁸

This is who God is. This is what God's Revelation is ultimately about. "Following this cultural manner of thinking," Joe writes, "revelation 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,

²⁶ De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 303-7.

²⁷ De Mesa, "Jesus," *A Theological Reader*, 307-14.

²⁸ José M. de Mesa "Communicating 'Revelation-Faith' with Culture in Mind," *A Theological Reader*, 324.

an overall sense of well-being.”²⁹

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 of “salvation” might be better expressed for Filipinos in the word (and its variations) of *ginhawa*, rather than *kaligtasan*. In developing his argument, Joe begins from the biblical tradition, noting that “the notion of salvation is rooted in *earthly* realities.”³⁰ 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 for the full flourishing of all of humanity when the Kingdom—of as I prefer to speak of it, the “Kin-dom” of God³¹—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

²⁹ De Mesa, “Communicating ‘Revelation-Faith,’” *A Theological Reader*, 325.

³⁰ José M. de Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 332.

³¹ See Stephen B. Bevans, *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024), 12-13.

any *hirap*.³² 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 forward 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.

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].”³³ “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).”³⁴

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

³² De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 333-35.

³³ De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” *A Theological Reader*, 333.

³⁴ De Mesa, “The *Ginhawa* Which Jesus Brings,” 345-46.

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.

José de Mesa as Friend: Cherishing His Memory

True to his identity as a Filipino, Joe loved people. He was relational to the core. Joe's first love, of course, was his family—his beloved wife Yvonne, and his three children Dottie, Njel, and Rissa. My sense is that Yvonne, besides being Joe's lifelong partner in marriage, was also his best friend. "I am very lucky," Joe wrote in the Introduction to *A Theological Reader*, "that my wife affirmed and supported my love for theology. She has been my constant fellow traveler on this journey, helping me in editing what I wrote."³⁵ Several years before, in the Acknowledgements to his book *Why Theology is Never Far From Home*, Joe wrote that "I would like to thank most of all my wife, Yvonne, and our children . . . for more than putting up with a theology in their midst. They have made, by their affection and support, studying and writing both congenial and worthwhile."³⁶ Yvonne and his children have been companions—*mga kasama*—on his pilgrimage in the "creation of a Filipino theological tradition," and so beloved *kaibigan*.

But, as Joe has written in his Introductions and Acknowledgments, he has had many more companions on his journey: Frank De Graeve, SJ in Leuven, Paul Van Parijs, CICM at Maryhill School of Theology, Lode Wostyn, CICM, with whom he wrote some of his first books, Anscar Chupungco, OSB of Maryhill, Goeffrey King, SJ, of the EAPI, Andrew González, FSC, William

³⁵ De Mesa and Bayot, "Introduction," *A Theological Reader*, 3.

³⁶ De Mesa, *Why Theology Is Never Far From Home*, xi.

Garvey, FSC, and Carmelita Quebengco of De La Salle University. Joe taught hundreds of students at Maryhill, EAPI, De La Salle, Catholic Theological Union, and the International Congregation Center, and many other places throughout the world. I know that many of you here today were Joe's students and friends, and you know how much he cared about you and cared for you.

Joe mentions me as well in the Acknowledgments of *A Theological Reader* 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 CTU to be the "Luzbetak Visiting Professor." As you can imagine, 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.

I look back gratefully and joyfully, remembering our "Luzbetak excursions" to Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln lived and worked before becoming the President of the United States, to Mundelein Seminary to see in brick and mortar the dreams of Chicago's Cardinal George Mundelein, and to downtown Chicago to see *The Lion King* and *Wicked*. Joe inscribed my copy of *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

³⁷ De Mesa, "Acknowledgments," *A Theological Reader*, xi.

at CTU last Spring. Even greater is your friendship which made my stay so much more meaningful. In friendship, Joe." On Easter, 2003, Joe gifted me with a copy of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his inscription, he wrote "Many are the wonderful tales of Narnia, so are the tales of a Luzbetak visiting professor. This is thanks to such tales! Maraming, maraming salamat, Steve. Joe.

Ours was a truly wonderful friendship. It's hard to express what Joe meant to me, and how he enriched my life as a theologian, and especially as a person. I will always be grateful for his *kagandahang loob*, for his love of all things Filipino, for his theological passion and genius, for his sharing his family with me, and especially for his friendship. I am sure that many, most, perhaps all of you here this morning can say the same thing.

Conclusion

Hard to express as well is the honor I feel [note the word!] in presenting these reflections to remember and honor Joe. I hesitated to accept the honor. I told Yvonne when she invited me to do this that the task should go to a Filipino and that this talk should be in Tagalog. But Yvonne insisted, and so here I am. I hope Joe approves!

As I said at the beginning of this presentation, I hope that my words have done some small justice to the theological giant we honor in this conference. I think the best way to honor Joe, however, is to continue his project of developing a truly Filipino theology and theological tradition. There is much to do, much to learn, much to discover. Through your work, let Joe's pilgrimage continue.

About the Author

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