# *T'NALAK*: GOD WEAVES HOPE THROUGH, WITH, AND IN THE CHURCH

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## Introduction

In the rapidly evolving epochal changes of our contemporary world, marked by technological advancements and social complexities, the question of God's presence and the role of the Church takes on profound significance.[1] Growing up in the realities of Polomolok, South Cotabato—a municipality in Mindanao where agricultural capitalism brought in by an American international corporation in the early 1960s contributed to the advancement and development of the community on the one hand and the social structures of injustice against the indigenous people and environment on the other, brings forth this existential question of where or how God is present in all of these oppressive contexts. In the same way, where and how is the Church present in the experiences of injustice and suffering of the indigenous people with their rich cultural heritage often overshadowed by a history marred with discrimination, violence, and displacement from their ancestral domains?

Against this backdrop, the Indigenous *T'boli* people of Lake Sebu in Mindanao, with their sacred cultural tapestry

1. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: *Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, Vatican*. 24 Nov. 2013, par. 52-67, accessed January 5, 2024, https://www.vatican.va.

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embodied in *T'nalak*,[2] offer a unique perspective on how God weaves hope across space and time. The rich tapestry of salvation history unfolds across generations, revealing God's active engagement with humanity. God has already been desiring to draw us into him; God has a universal salvific plan to bring about the communion of humanity and the world with God. From the time of the Jewish people's enslavement in Egypt to the proclamation of the Decalogue, to the Jesus Christ event, and the Church two millennia later, God's presence remains. Each thread contributes to the intricate design of God's plan for salvation. In this context, the cyclical patterns and motifs of *T'nalak* symbolize the recurring themes of hope, justice, and divine intervention across time and space of human existence—the timeless nature of God's salvific plan and the role of the Church in perpetuating the threads of hope across history. The Church, then, weaves its strand into the tapestry of salvation history and actively engages with the challenges and triumphs of each era—ensuring that the message of hope continues to be interwoven with the human narrative.

This synthesis paper explores the intertwining threads of salvation history, the Incarnation, and the Church's mission in the context of *T'nalak*, delving into the challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly the indigenous peoples, and their call for justice and compassion. Rooted in the papal encyclicals and the theological frameworks of Karl Rahner, Jacques Dupuis, and Edward Schillebeeckx, this exploration also delves into the role of the Church in weaving hope

2. Emmanuel Hernani, Ma Rosita Hernani, and Delmo Dulay, *Dancing With the Dreamweavers: A Narrative Discourse of the T'bolis of the Southern Philippines*, 2021, 206–207. *T'nalak* is a sacred woven textile of the *T'boli* tribe made from abaca fibers tediously crafted into patterns believed to arrive to the dreams of the *T'boli* women from *Fu Dalu*, the spirit of the Abaca, thus, the popular term "dreamweaving."

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through the threads of suffering, injustice, and displacement experienced by the indigenous peoples.

## The Incarnation: God Becoming a Divine Strand in the Weave

God has already been desiring to draw us into him; God has a universal salvific plan to bring about the communion of humanity and the world with God.[3] At a pivotal moment in history, God chose to become part of the tapestry by incarnating as Jesus Christ—the "Incarnate Word, the Son is present among us."[4] The Second Person's Incarnation reveals God's salvific desire for all of us and at the very "heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ."[5] The Word became flesh[6]—somewhat like God inserted Godself as a tangible divine strand interwoven with the tapestry of humanity, bridging the gap between the divine and the human. When God chose freely to undergo a descent through the Incarnation, it was a way for us to understand and assimilate Godself through Jesus' entering into our human context—our stories, languages, space, and time.[7]

Rahner backdrops God's salvific desire with the human being's universal experience of longing for God, their transcendental nature, which leads them towards the Absolute.[8]

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3. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Seabury, 1978), 201–2.

4. René Latourelle and Rino Archbishop Fisichella, eds., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 912.

5. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* par. 11, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.vatican.va.

6. John 1:14.

7. René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1966), 45.

8. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 181.

The *T'nalak* is a testament to this anthropological inclination of the *T'boli* people towards the Divine as described by their elder Gumbay Sulan—"since time immemorial, even before the coming of the church, we already know that there is *D'wata*, the Great Spirit up there... *D'wata* is the ultimate mystery and gives strength to everybody."[9] The *T'boli* people were considered animists—believing in an array of gods and nature spirits, but currently, most of the *T'boli* living around Lake Sebu have been integrated into the Church.[10] The Church, through the apostolic works of the Passionist Fathers in the Sta. Cruz Mission has "launched several development projects which are aimed at helping the tribespeople respond effectively to change"[11] and "courageously addressed the pressing social issues such as dam building, deforestation, and mining... and stood up for the well-being of the indigenous peoples and withstanding potential harms."[12]

As the ultimate weaver of hope, Christ's words and deeds inspire the Church to stand in solidarity with the marginalized, confronting the systemic injustices that perpetuate *negative contrast experiences.*[13] The Church—as an extension of

9. *Preserving Culture: The T'boli of Mindanao, Philippines*, Video, Part 1, 2010.

10. Ted Vincent Emboltorio, *Remembering the Past Passionist Mission to T'bolis in the Local Church of Marbel in the Light of Dangerous Memory* (MA thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 2023), 34–43, 150.

11. Emboltorio, 150.

12. Emboltorio, 30.

13. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 5–6, 28–29. Schillebeeckx defines "negative contrast experience" as an "experience of injustice, oppression or suffering that gives rise to protest and spurs us towards active transformation" by "issuing in the attempt to focus attention and resource on their immediate alleviation."

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the Incarnation,[14] participates in God's ongoing act of weaving hope into the fabric of human existence and becomes a "special sacral space set apart from secular developments and from culture, within which we grow in intimacy with God."[15] Like the Passionist Fathers' Mission with the *T'boli*, the Church strives to be a visible manifestation of the divine presence, a golden strand woven into the fabric of humanity, illuminating the path of hope and redemption.

## The Church Across Ages: Weaving "the Bride Bedecked with Her Jewels"

Following the Christ event, the Church continues to participate in God's weaving of hope across historical epochs. Pope Francis encapsulates the two thousand years of Christianity by stating that "countless peoples have received the grace of faith... each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the 'beauty of her varied face'... [and] takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornata monilibus suis*, 'the bride bedecked with her jewels.'"[16] From the early Christian communities to the complexities of modern times, the Church persists as a dynamic force in God's redemptive plan. Pope Francis describes this evolution wherein from the "original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world."[17] In this complex interweaving of many realities across history, the "unrecognized genuine witness of the Christian in this profane world

14. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 213.

15. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, 99.

16. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* par. 116, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.vatican.va.

17. Ibid., par. 11.

finds the source of its strength in that explicit Christianity which is shaped by active participation in the life of the Word and of the Sacrament of 'Christ's Church.'"[18]

In marginalized communities' negative contrast experiences, the Church emerges as a sacrament of hope**,** taking on a transformative role within the context of suffering and injustice. The Church is not only a *koinonia*—a "communion or sharing of grace with Christ, the fruit of his redemptive work," but it is also an "institution for salvation to which the keys that make entrance possible into the kingdom of God have been entrusted."[19] Through acts of compassion, advocacy, and solidarity, the Church—through God's grace, becomes a visible sign of God's redemptive presence.

The Church, then, like the weavers of *T'nalak*, must be attuned to the changing patterns of society, ensuring that the threads of hope are woven into the fabric of the human experience of suffering. With the establishment of agricultural colonies in Mindanao during the American occupation and the influx of settlers from Luzon and the Visayas after the Japanese occupation,[20] the *T'bolis* were "cheated of their lands by greedy land grabbers and driven back into the forests and mountains."[21] The establishment of the Passionist missions in Lake Sebu provided the *T'bolis* with "an integrated program of human development tailored to the peculiar cultural needs of the tribe,"[22] and a prophetic voice against the proposal to

18. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church and Mankind* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1965), 101.

19. Schillebeeckx, *The Church and Mankind*, 78.

20. Emboltorio, 31.

21. Don Gielas, "Local Priest Helping Isolated Tribe Adjust to Modern World," *Pittsburgh Catholic* Volume 122, Number 14 (May 31, 1974 edition).

22. Emboltorio, 39.

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build a massive dam project set to "displace several thousand people most of whom are native *T'bolis*."[23] The Church, rooted in Christ's words and deeds, becomes a woven sacrament of hope that calls for action against the structures of injustice and oppression experienced by the *T'bolis* of Lake Sebu.

## Inculturation and Ecumenism: Weaving Hope Towards Unity in Diversity

The diverse motifs and patterns within *T'nalak* invite reflections on inculturation and ecumenism—the movement toward unity among Christian denominations. The various symbols, unique hues, and patterns can be seen as a metaphor for the diverse expressions of Christian faith in a particular cultural context. Pope Francis points out that "cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity... [because] the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity."[24] For example, in liturgical matters, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that the use of the vernacular language—a concrete example of inculturation for divine worship,[25] provides this avenue for people to understand God speaking to them through their "full active participation... in these liturgical celebrations."[26]

The weaving of *T'nalak* bears witness to this sacred dialogue between Christianity and indigenous culture. The Gospel, rather than imposing itself on indigenous communities, becomes interwoven with their cultural identity, creating a

23. Reginald Arliss, "Two Voices, One Theme: DAMS," *MSPC Communications* (January 1978): 24.

24. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* par. 117, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.vatican.va.

25. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, December 4, 1963, par. 36.

26. Ibid., par. 41.

tapestry that celebrates the harmonious integration of faith and culture. When the Passionist missionaries expanded their apostolates, they established organizations to support the *T'bolis* in their "pursuit of self-determination, self-empowerment, sustainable development, and liberation from any threats that compromised their existence," and also to foster "dialogue on matters of faith, education, inculturation, and the promotion of Schools of Living Traditions (SLT)."[27] These SLTs provide the "children of the tribe the opportunity to learn about their own heritage in their own language... [wherein] their skills, values, and traditions will never be forgotten but can and will be preserved and passed to the future generations."[28]

Similarly, *T'nalak* also becomes a cultural bridge in the context of ecumenism, inviting Christians from different denominations to appreciate the richness of indigenous spirituality. The message of hope woven into *T'nalak* becomes a unifying force that invites Christians to celebrate their shared faith and commitment to Christian unity, the pursuit of social justice, and the promotion of environmental stewardship, recognizing that the threads of justice and love are universal, weaving through the fabric of all Christian traditions.[29]

## Missionary Call: Weaving Hope in the Negative Contrast through Synodality

Edward Schillebeeckx's theological perspective on negative contrast experiences emphasizes the transformative potential

27. Emboltorio, 37, 104.

28. Lee Ayn Poncardas et al., *Reconnecting with the Past in Understanding Today and Tomorrow: Folklore of the T'boli People* (General Santos City: Mindanao State University, 2017), 28.

29. International Anglican – Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, March 23, 2007, par. 118.

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within suffering, asserting that God is present amid adversity. The Church, summoned to be a Church with a human face, must confront the structures of sin in the name of progress or modernization that perpetuate suffering and inequality.[30] Pope Francis calls us to hear and respond to the cry of the poor: "Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society."[31] All of the baptized are called to participate in God's ongoing act of weaving hope and mercy in the peripheries towards a future filled with justice, joy, love, solidarity, and hope[32]—to be "more sensitive to the needs of others... to reach out to others and seek their good."[33] As a religious sent into the mission, there is an invitation to be more open to the call to "cooperate with him [God] and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit."[34]

Drawing inspiration from the cyclical and interconnected patterns of T'nalak, synodality[35] encourages a collaborative approach in recognizing that each thread, representing different ecclesial realities and local contexts, is essential to the overall beauty and resilience of God's tapestry. This reflects how the force of sensus fidelium can promote the "active role of the whole Church, especially the contribution of the lay faithful, in preserving and transmitting the Church's faith."[36]

30. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* par. 214, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.vatican.va.

31. Ibid., par. 187.

32. Ibid., par. 120.

33. Ibid., par. 09.

34. Ibid., par. 12.

35. Synodality, a term gaining prominence in contemporary ecclesial discussions, refers to the participatory and collaborative governance of the Church.

36. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Pasay City: Paulines, 2014), para. 34.

The local Church of Marbel today, where the T'bolis and other Indigenous peoples belong, continues to weave justice and hope in the IP communities by keeping the "suffering people at the heart of her mission, promoting sensitivity to their appeals against destructive mining [SMI Tampakan Copper Gold Mine] and dam constructions... to advocate for a suitable culture and environment that prioritize the integral lives of the local people, addressing environmental imbalance and social divisions."[37] The bishop of the diocese has stated that the Church will "never stop campaigning against mining as senior priests and bishops [who]... long stood adamantly against the penetrating companies that might destroy the humanity and the biodiversity."[38] The Church is driven to build hope for the future through the reversal of the sufferings of people because our present experience of salvation is what the future will hold—"eschatology is man's view from the perspective of his experience of salvation, the experience which he now has in grace and in Christ... the present as the beginning of the future is what man knows it to be in his Christian anthropology."[39] By actively engaging with the narratives of those at the margins, the Church extends its presence as a compassionate and transformative force.

## Conclusion

The *T'nalak* tapestry is a potent symbol of God's ongoing act of weaving hope throughout history. It beautifully intertwines threads of salvation history, the Incarnation, and the Church's mission, particularly in the context of marginalized communities, i.e., the *T'boli* people. God's presence is woven

37. Emboltorio, 18.

38. Emboltorio, 91.

39. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 433.

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into the *T'nalak* through the Incarnation, where Christ became the ultimate divine strand , bridging the gap between the human and the divine. The Church, then, becomes an extension of this weaving, called to participate in God's redemptive plan by confronting injustices and standing in solidarity with the suffering. The *T'nalak* also celebrates the harmonious integration of faith and culture, inviting collaboration and dialogue between Christian denominations and even recognizing the spiritual richness of indigenous traditions. Through interreligious dialogue, the Church embraces the diversity of threads that contribute to God's tapestry, extending beyond the Church's boundaries. Synodality, inspired by the interconnected patterns of the *T'nalak*, encourages a collaborative approach within the Church, recognizing the value of each individual thread in weaving a tapestry of hope and justice as a compassionate and transformative force in the world.

As the Church embraces its role as a weaver of hope, all are actively engaged in the ongoing transformation process, recognizing that God, as the ultimate weaver, is present in every thread of suffering and redemption. The Church, the Passionist missionaries in the Diocese of Marbel, become a strand of hope interwoven with the narratives of suffering and redemption, contributing to the divine masterpiece of God's tapestry across space and time. As a religious, the invitation is to be open to the Spirit to weave hope in the peripheries and people's sufferings. The *T'nalak*, with its rich symbolism, becomes a metaphor for the Church's mission in the world, inviting Christians to actively confront negative contrast experiences and weave threads of justice, love, and hope into the fabric of human existence recognizing the universal presence and action of God in the whole of creation.