# LOYOLA PAPERS

## STUDENT AND ALUMNI JOURNAL OF LOYOLA SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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For a synodal Church

| communion

| participation

| mission

### ARTICLES

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*Roel Joe E. Abonal*

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**Fathoming Faith: A Philosophical Synthesis on Faith and Reason**
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### CONTRIBUTORS

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# EDITOR'S PREFACE

On October 4-29, 2023, the Synod of Bishops will celebrate the first session of its 16th Ordinary General Assembly, with a second session that is scheduled to be held around the same time next year. Since its first assembly in 1967, there has been a total of fifteen ordinary or regular general assemblies, three extraordinary general assemblies, and eleven special assemblies to tackle regional concerns. However, this coming Synod is different in many important ways.

First, it is a Synod that has Synodality itself for its theme. Whereas previous synods focused on special areas of concern for the Church, here the Church reflects on being in synod itself, not only as an occasional event, but as a way of life that she wants to embrace. Thus, the Pope emphasizes that synods are not just one of the many activities or structures of the Church, but synodality is "the path which God expects of the Church of the third millennium." Synodality is a way of life that embodies the spirit of being in synod, as the people of God gathers to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit. The *Vademecum* for the Preparatory Phase expresses it beautifully: "Synodality calls upon pastors to listen attentively to the flock entrusted to their care, just as it calls the laity to freely and honestly express their views. Everyone listens to one other out of love, in a spirit of communion and our common mission" (2.3).

Second, it is a Synod that involves the Church in all levels. While the Synod of Bishops was originally conceived by Paul VI as a regular gathering of bishops in continuation of the experience of collegiality during the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis extended the process in this Synod

to include a Diocesan Phase and Continental Phase to encourage participation at the local level. In some places, there was even a Vicariate Phase or Parish Phase, allowing many of the priests and laity to personally experience being in synod themselves. More than any output, this highly formative and potentially transformative encounter is the Synod's fundamental aim. The *Preparatory Document* states that the purpose of this Synod is "not to produce documents, but 'to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to be nourished, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands'"(PD 32). Indeed, the Pope revolutionized the process further by inviting to the October Assembly not only bishops or clergy but laity — many among them women — and not merely as observers but as full participants with voting power.

Third, this is a Synod that the Pope expects will carry on long after the actual assembly itself has ended. Ordinarily, a synod culminates in the publication of a related apostolic exhortation where the Pope gathers the fruits of the synodal discussions. However, as Pope Francis expressed in "The Pope's Video" produced by the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network for October 2023, he is praying that this will become a Synod where "nothing is over, but here an ecclesial path continues." Hopefully, the spirit of communion which was experienced in various phases of the Synod will still be lived out, nourished, and strengthened in all the areas of Church life. Hopefully, the empowerment and participation, especially of the laity – and in a special way of women – will still be sustained not only in the coming synods but in all ecclesial activities. Hopefully, the mission

of the Church will become even more dynamic and effective by her practice of synodality as a way of life, bearing witness to the power of the Holy Spirit and reaching out with particular solicitude to the peripheries. Only thus will this long Synod on Synodality bear its desired fruit: to be a synodal Church.

On this note, *Loyola Papers* is excited to bring you this issue, with the first two papers connected to the theme of synodality.

The first article, titled "Synodality in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines" by **Roel Joe E. Abonal** surveys recent Church documents, from Vatican II to the preparatory documents of the ongoing Synod that pave the way for our current understanding of synodality. Then it proceeds to show how the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines has been trying to live out these synodal principles long before the present Synod. At the same time, he points to some challenges in living the spirit of synodality that have been encountered, particularly in connection with the RH Bill debates. As the Church continues to aspire to be a listening Church and new issues continue to arise that put the listening ability of her leaders to the test, this article serves as a relevant and prophetic reminder of the kind of Church we are trying to be.

"Conversations by the Well: A Lesson on Synodality" by **Aldo Miguel Constantino M. Bonifacio** delves into what he calls the "healing agenda of the Synod on Synodality" and calls our attention to how the ongoing synodal process is actually promoting no less than a paradigm shift within the Church. Anchoring his reflection on the Johannine story of the Samaritan Woman who encountered Jesus by the well, he draws lessons on how the Church today can come to terms with her own sinfulness and "unbelonging" so as

to receive the healing she needs to become her true synodal self. At the same time, there is a parallel invitation to imitate Jesus in dealing with "others" with a welcoming attitude that allays fear, encourages self-disclosure, and opens the way to encounter and dialogue.

**Edryan Paul J. Colmenares, SJ**'s "A Framework for Christian Social Involvement from the Writings of Dean Brackley SJ: Scriptural and Theological Foundations" explores the work of the El Salvadorian Jesuit liberation theologian, Dean Brackley, and its scriptural and theological foundations. Beginning with a brilliant exposition of the theology of the Reign of God and its implications, it proceeds to compare Brackley's thoughts with the ideas of two other great theologians, namely, Karl Rahner and Gustavo Gutierrez. It then gathers the insights of Brackley into a framework that can complement the pastoral cycle and compares this with two other frameworks: one by Jacques Maritain and the other by Juan Luis Segundo. What results is a proposal towards a more level-headed, contextually-rooted, interdisciplinary, and spiritually grounded framework for Christian social action that is hoped to be more politically effective in responding to current and future social issues in the light of faith.

Next, we have "Paul's Conversion Experience and His Post-Conversion View of and Relationship with Judaism" by **Diogo Roger D'Souza, SFX** which is an attempt at an exegetical exposition of Paul's encounter with the Risen Christ that opened the way for his conversion, as narrated by Paul himself and by the evangelist in Luke-Acts. Moving forward, it questions the application of the word "conversion" (*metanoia*) to Paul's experience based on Paul's self-understanding of what happened to him. Instead, the words transformation or reconfiguration are suggested, or an added nuancing of the word "conversion" is proposed

to more accurately describe the shift in Paul's perspective and the corresponding changes in his life, including his relationship with Judaism.

"The Theology of Begging in the *Spiritual Exercises*" by **Jose John B. Fuertes** invites attention to a notable feature of the Ignatian Exercises where one is asked to beg for the grace that one desires from God as a practice of spiritual poverty. Looking at the practice and notion of poverty and mendicancy in Christianity from Christ and the apostles down to the founders of the Mendicant Orders, who greatly influenced Ignatius in his conversion, the article goes on to trace the Ignatian experience and understanding of poverty and begging. What follows is an interesting scriptural and theological exposition of the meaning of begging and how it can be applied to prayer and spirituality. The author concludes with a personal testimony of how the practice of begging in the *Spiritual Exercises* led him to experience the loving desire and infinite graciousness of God.

**Le Dac Thang, SJ**'s "Understanding the Baci-Soukhwan Ritual: A Step Towards Inculturation in the Lao Catholic Church" examines the practice of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, as adapted by the Catholic Church in Laos. Noting that there are no official guidelines issued by the local Church up to now to guide the faithful regarding this widespread cultural practice, he indicates the key points of intersection as well as to critical points of divergence or confusion, which calls for clarification from the Church to avoid misunderstanding. Clearly explaining these important doctrinal aspects will help the faithful in Lao to practice their cultural tradition in harmony with and enriched by their Christian faith.

Last but not least, we have **Ryan Janelle A. Salvacion**'s "Mary: The New Ark of the Covenant in Revelation 11:19-12:6," an exegetical commentary on the famous passage that has sometimes been applied in the Catholic tradition to the Blessed

Virgin Mary but has also been interpreted by some scholars as an allusion to the Church. After comparing various interpretations of the text, the paper also turns to other biblical accounts as well as extra-biblical catechetical and theological resources, including the Church Fathers, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI, and Bishop Robert Barron in support of the Marian interpretation.

* * *

For this issue, we are also happy to showcase one synthesis paper from the Philosophy program and two synthesis papers from the Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology Program.

**Martin Wang SJ**'s "Fathoming Faith: A Philosophical Synthesis on Faith and Reason" integrates his experiences as a seminarian struggling to understand his Christian belief in a growingly secular and atheistic Chinese society. Having undergone a crisis of faith himself, the author presents a sincere and uncontrived quest for truth and meaning amidst life's unending questions.

"Diakonia as Lived Theology" by **Cosme Carlo A. Lacang, SJ** draws from his personal experience as a newly ordained deacon in an attempt to synthesize the fundamental teachings of Christian faith where he uses as framework the words addressed by the bishop to the newly ordained deacon in the rite of ordination: "*Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach*."

Finally, we have **Michael George M. Villasis**' "'Grant Me Only to Love You': The Contemplation to Attain Love in the Spiritual Exercises" which draws its inspiration from the "Contemplation to Attain Love" in the Fourth Week of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. He then develops an interesting theological synthesis revolving around Ignatius' points

about love and his lovely prayer, popularly known as the *Suscipe* – a creative Filipino translation of which, included as an appendix, is not to be missed.

* * *

From the parish to the continental level, the ongoing Synod used the prayer, *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, that was said at the opening of every session of Vatican II and in many other Councils, Synods, and Church gatherings for hundreds of years. It is a lovely prayer attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville and can also be used by theologians whether in private study or public discourses. Let this be our prayer, too, not only for the current Synod but for ourselves, as we work together to become a truly synodal Church:

> We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
> as we gather together in Your name.
> With You alone to guide us,
> make Yourself at home in our hearts;
> Teach us the way we must go
> and how we are to pursue it.
> We are weak and sinful;
> do not let us promote disorder.
> Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
> nor partiality influence our actions.
> Let us find in You our unity
> so that we may journey together to eternal life
> and not stray from the way of truth
> and what is right.
> All this we ask of You,
> who are at work in every place and time,
> in the communion of the Father and the Son,
> forever and ever. Amen.

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo

# ARTICLES

# SYNODALITY IN THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES

*Roel Joe E. Abonal*

Synodality originates from God Himself,[1] a community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[2] Sacred Scripture is replete with reasons why synodality can be claimed to be already present even in the early Christian community (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). We have been created by a Trinitarian, communitarian God. In Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God claimed for Himself a people and established His covenant with them (Ex 3:6). In the presence of Moses and the community gathered after their liberation from slavery in Egypt, God established His Law that ensures the people's freedom, their communal way of life and His abiding presence in them (Ex 20:1-21). As Jesus gathered the Twelve and preached the Good News to all (Mt 10:1-15), we can see how He re-established God's People and reoriented their laws into a command of loving God and neighbor. When Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:6-11), He sent His Spirit to guide the Church (Acts 2:1-4) and the experiences of the early Christians provide clear manifestations of how synodality was lived out in the first community of disciples.

[1] See International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,* no. 3.

[2] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 259.

## Recent Developments on Synodality

### The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was convoked at a rather unusual time. There were no heresies that needed to be addressed, no political upheaval affecting the life of the Church that needed to be discussed, and no more kings or queens or emperors who intervened to ensure the unity of the Church. Instead, a rapidly modern world was rising. Church teachings were intact but needed to be examined and proclaimed from a new perspective.

St. John XXIII was relatively old when he was elected to the papacy. Many thought that after the long reign of Pius XII, the cardinals would elect a simple caretaker pope. However, John XXIII did not intend to be a caretaker. From his experiences as Papal Nuncio and Church historian, he realized the need for the Church to be updated, a kind of *aggiornamento* ("bringing up to date") or renewal.

Elected at the age of 77, St. John XXIII knew he would not have a long reign as pope. That was why barely three months after his election, he announced that he would call for an ecumenical council. He immediately took steps to prepare for this occasion by appointing members of preparatory commissions. What was noteworthy about this council was that the Pope wanted it to be truly ecumenical. Thus, observers from other traditions were invited and, unlike other councils, were not persuaded to return to Catholicism in order to join. Another important step the Council took was its pastoral approach instead of the usual doctrinal or dogmatic approaches. Indeed, it was the First Council that issued no anathemas in its pronouncements and focused on its positive messages for all Christians and the world. Furthermore, the active participation of the bishops

was sought after. They were not to be passive observers but rather true shepherds of their local dioceses and the universal Church as successors to the Apostles.

Attended by more than 2,000 bishops from all over the world, Vatican II produced 16 documents discussing a wide array of topics not only concerning the *ad intra* of the Church but most importantly, its *ad extra*. In the discussion about the Church, the most important documents are *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

Some authors argued that while synodality was not particularly mentioned in the proceedings and documents of Vatican II, the radical change in the formulation of *Lumen Gentium* implied a synodal way of looking at the Church. When the debates were taking place, the usual stand was to focus primarily on the hierarchical character of the Church where the pope, the bishops and the clergy would take precedence. However, later, it was proposed and agreed upon by most of the bishops that the common priesthood shared through baptism was the starting point of any discussion on the Church before any talks on hierarchy or charism took place. This paved the way for a new understanding of what membership in the Church should look like.

*Lumen Gentium* states: "The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light."[3] From the very beginning, God has willed that all people be gathered

[3]Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" *(Lumen Gentium), Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 10.

to Him as witnessed in the life of Israel which now is found in the new covenant in Christ who established the Church. In baptism, the person is incorporated into this new family of God where one is endowed with the gifts of the Spirit and is made child of God.

This proclamation from *Lumen Gentium* fueled a new perspective on the participation of the laity in the Church. Vatican II did not stop with *Lumen Gentium*. Another document of Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* discussed the important role of the laity in the missionary work of the Church. It stressed that by baptism, the laity also bears the three-fold function of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. "The laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world."[4]

The laity are called to participate in the Church's activity through their prayer, service, and life of witnessing. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* encouraged the faithful to reach out to the fringes of the world and especially be catalysts in restoring temporal order. "As citizens, they must cooperate with other citizens with their particular skill and on their responsibility. Everywhere and in all things, they must seek the justice of God's kingdom."[5]

The laity's role is indispensable. Since they are primarily immersed in the temporal affairs of the world, they have the power to influence and learn from it. If the Church, the hierarchy in particular, hopes to evangelize the world, the laity's voice must be heard so that the Church as a whole can respond

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[4]Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" *(Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 2.

[5]Ibid., no. 7.

to the challenges of evangelization and avail of the positive advancements the world has achieved. "The Lord renews His invitation to all the laity to come closer to Him every day, recognizing that what is His is also their own (Phil. 2:5), to associate themselves with Him in His saving mission."[6]

By espousing a synodal attitude, the Church can understand a lot from the laity regarding their expertise, reflections, and perspectives. They are the ones who are at the forefront of daily life, raising families and upholding the sanctity of life and marriage. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* has highlighted this: "It has always been the duty of Christian married partners but today it is the greatest part of their apostolate to manifest and prove by their way of life the indissolubility and sacredness of the marriage bond, strenuously to affirm the right and duty of parents and guardians to educate children in a Christian manner, and to defend the dignity and lawful autonomy of the family."[7] Therefore, if the Church teaches that the Universal Church is made up of the communion of local churches and local churches are composed of domestic churches which is the family, the voice of the laity, of parents, and the young are essential to see the different realities besetting the Church. With their voices listened to and their experiences considered, the Church can better understand and hopefully respond to the challenges of everyday human existence.

Moreover, synodality in the documents of Vatican II was not only centered on the laity but also on the hierarchy. It must be noted that the ministerial priesthood is borne out of the common priesthood to serve and guide it. Those who belong to the ministerial priesthood "are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God...

[6]Ibid., no. 33.

[7]Ibid., no. 11.

enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation."[8] Here, *Lumen Gentium* had recovered the ancient understanding of the function of the ordained which has been quite lost in the past centuries due to the influence of royal prestige and political entanglements of the hierarchy. "Bishops, therefore, with their helpers, the priests and deacons, have taken up the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers for doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing."[9]

From this teaching, it can be said that the ministerial priesthood, especially the bishops, is the presider of synodality. They have the responsibility of ensuring that the voices of everyone, particularly in their local Churches are listened to and considered. *Christus Dominus*, another document of Vatican II, established that "since it is the mission of the Church to converse with the human society in which it lives, bishops especially must seek out men and both request and promote dialogue with them. These conversations on salvation ought to be noted for clarity of speech as well as humility and mildness in order that at all times truth may be joined to charity and understanding with love."[10]

Furthermore, *Christus Dominus* encouraged bishops to be present among their flock, listen to their cries and anxieties, and be familiar with their daily lives. "Let them be good shepherds who know their sheep and whose sheep know them. Let them be true fathers who excel in the spirit of love and

[8]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 18.

[9]Ibid., no. 20.

[10]Second Vatican Council, "Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church" *(Christus Dominus)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 13.

solicitude for all and to whose divinely conferred authority all gratefully submit themselves. Let them so gather and mold the whole family of their flock that everyone, conscious of his own duties, may live and work in the communion of love."[11] Through the bishops, Christ becomes all the more present among the people. On a more practical note, this gesture and attitude of the bishop allows him to be an effective preacher, presider, and pastor for the flock entrusted to him. Synodality becomes possible when the bishop supports, encourages, and practices it.

Moreover, the relationships within the ministerial priesthood also manifest synodality. In each local Church, the diocesan bishop is to have his presbyterium where the priests serve as co-workers of his in the ministry. *Christus Dominus* declared: "All presbyters, both diocesan and religious, participate in and exercise with the bishop the one priesthood of Christ and are thereby constituted prudent cooperators of the episcopal order. In the care of souls, however, the first place is held by diocesan priests who are incardinated or attached to a particular church, for they have fully dedicated themselves in the service of caring for a single portion of the Lord's flock. In consequence, they form one presbytery and one family whose father is the bishop."[12] Together, they form a college, a body whose head is the bishop himself. Collectively, they help the bishop to discharge his pastoral duties as shepherd of the flock in a certain local Church.

As the bishop's representative in a certain portion of the local Church, the pastor or parish priest is essential in helping the bishop determine the pastoral challenges and appropriate responses concerning the parish and the diocese. According

[11]Ibid., no. 16.

[12]Ibid., no. 28.

to *Christus Dominus,* "Pastors, however, are cooperators of the bishop in a very special way, for as pastors in their own name they are entrusted with the care of souls in a certain part of the diocese under the bishop's authority."[13] Therefore, in the exercise of synodality, the pastors also bring to the bishop's attention, usually through presbyteral meetings, the concerns of their parishes. They also listen to and are made aware of other issues of the diocese arising from the reports of other pastors. Here, communion and collaboration with the bishop and the rest of the diocesan clergy are important for synodality to be seen and felt.

Vatican II also mentioned about the collegiality of the bishops. If examined closely, the collegial nature of the bishops' communion manifests a synodal character. The college they compose with the pope as head communicates an image of walking together in the governance of the universal Church. *Lumen Gentium* declared: "The order of bishops, which succeeds to the college of Apostles and gives this apostolic body continued existence, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head."[14] If we now understand the college of bishops as succeeding the college of the Apostles, therefore, it can be inferred that they also bear the same character which Jesus Himself has willed that the apostolic college bear. Moreover, this meant togetherness in journeying, praying, governing, and preaching with Peter as the head.

Another breakthrough of the Second Vatican Council was its concern to articulate the *ad extra* of the Church. The Council Fathers deemed it necessary to have a guiding document as

[13]Ibid., no. 30.

[14]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 22.

regards the Church's relationship with the world. Notably, *Gaudium et Spes* was not called a "dogmatic" constitution but a "pastoral" one. While the bases of the Council's teaching were dogmas, the Council Fathers were still prophetic enough to foresee that the issues they were discussing would be significant in the future. It must be remembered that Vatican II happened after World War II while nations were slowly piling up their nuclear arsenal. Also, the threats of racism and colonialism continued to prevail, and the economic inequalities only widened steadily. Hence, *Gaudium et Spes* wished to bring everyone back to the reality that humanity is indispensable and human dignity is always intact no matter what. The Constitution states: "For Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created 'to the image of God,' is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory."[15] Moreover, this dignity of man is also rooted not only because of humanity's origin but also because of his destination which is communion with God. The document added: "For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator."[16]

*Gaudium et Spes* was the Council's invitation for all men of goodwill to dialogue. *Lumen Gentium* can be considered the Church's road map for an internal synodality. *Gaudium et Spes* is the Church's way of assuring the whole world that she is with the entire human race on the way, believers or non-believers

[15]Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" *(Gaudium et Spes)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 12.

[16]Ibid., no. 19.

alike. The document acknowledged that humanity has become more interdependent with the growing and advancing technology. However, it also noted that such interdependence is not reached fully in technological matters but more so in deeper, interpersonal ones.[17] The social nature of humanity and the growing availability of communicating with each other should foster greater understanding among nations, sadly, this has not been the case. There is always the threat of isolation and selfishness. Failure to dialogue is ironic in a modern world where technology seems to have brought everyone closer. The Council reminded everyone that humanity's "social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny." To be with others is an essential aspect of being a human person.

In sum, Vatican II did not explicitly mention synodality, but its documents and how it proceeded pointed to synodality. The Council brought everyone back to what is necessary: establishing that relationship with God and others. What fosters, nurtures, and deepens these relationships are the abilities of humanity to listen and walk together despite differences. There is still much more to know about synodality from the context of Vatican II, and what is clear is the fact that it opened and moved the Church closer to this realization.

## The ITC Document

On 2 March 2018, the International Theological Commission (ITC), headed by Luis Cardinal Ladaria Ferrer S.J., Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. This is perhaps the most deliberate attempt on the part of the Church to look into

[17]Ibid., no. 23.

and discuss synodality and how it can be helpful in the Church of the Third Millennium.

The document traced back the origins of synodality from both Scripture and Tradition. It also relied on Church magisterium, especially with the Second Vatican Council. It featured ways to live synodality on the local and universal levels by establishing structural reforms. For one, the document proposes forming presbyteral and lay councils in every diocese. Furthermore, it also noted that the present set-up of the Synod of Bishops allows for the participation of bishops from different dioceses. However, the topic of such synods had always been coming from the Vatican. While the goal of the document was to establish the theological foundations of synodality, it also suggested some pastoral orientations which could help make synodality happen at every level of Church life.

In the document, it is said that the theological basis of synodality is the Trinitarian origin and character of the Church. "In this way, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the Church shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity, which is destined to embrace the whole of humanity."[18] Therefore, it is this communion that is the source and cause for everyone's participation in the Church given their specific gifts and charisms. Such communion and participation are anchored on the fact that everyone in the world is *in via*, on the way to that final destination: God Himself.

This journeying together is guided by no other than the Holy Spirit Himself, whom Christ promised to His Church. If the Spirit is the bond of love in the Trinity, it is also the same

[18]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, March 02, 2018), no. 43.

Spirit who nourishes and guides the Church. "The principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God."[19] How is the Holy Spirit visible in the Church? The document enumerated that it is manifested "in the equal dignity of the baptized, the universal call to holiness, the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ, the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, and the life and mission of each local Church."[20]

Moreover, the document states that synodality is an expression of the ecclesiology of communion, which *Lumen Gentium* had reoriented through the arrangement of its chapters.[21] It has emphasized that because of baptism, everyone in the Church is "called to play an active role inasmuch as they share in the one priesthood of Christ, and are meant to receive the various charisms given by the Holy Spirit in view of the common good."[22] Everyone needs to contribute and collaborate for the Church is not just about the hierarchy but about everyone—both the lay and the ordained as they compose the one People of God. The gifts and charisms received by each one are meant to build up the Church of Christ.

Having mentioned the need for participation, the document also clarified that participation does not necessarily mean everyone can decide. In a synodal church, each one functions according to his/her gifts and charisms. Therefore, it must be noted that "the authority of Pastors is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ the Head for the up building of the entire Body, not a delegated and representative function of the people."[23]

[19]Ibid., no. 46.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., no. 54.

[22]Ibid., no. 55.

[23]Ibid., no. 67.

Furthermore, in a synodal Church, consultation does not necessarily entail decision-making. Unlike in civil parlance, when there is a consultation, the majority's wish usually is carried over. It is noted, however, that consultation, especially of the faithful, is very important. The ITC declared: "In the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will."[24] However, it is not according to the faithful's gift to decide.[25] That is the gift and function proper to pastors. "A synod, an assembly, a council cannot take decisions without its legitimate Pastors. The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community."[26] Hence, according to the document, there must be a distinction between decision-making and decision-taking. In decision-making, all the voices in the community are listened to and considered. The pastors should hopefully consider the wishes of the people. In decision-taking, on the other hand, it is the bishop who has the proper authority and competence, for he is the sure and visible sign of apostolicity and catholicity in a given jurisdiction.[27]

In conclusion, there are three things that the document wishes to convey and clarify. First, synodality is a style, a way of life that should be practiced in every level of Church life. It is the Church's specific *modus vivendi et operandi,* which is visible

[24]Ibid., no. 68.

[25]On 26 April 2023, Mario Cardinal Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, and Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, Archbishop of Luxembourg and General Relator of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, announced to the public Pope Francis's decision to include non-bishops, with a right to vote, to participate in the upcoming Synod.

[26]Ibid., no. 69.

[27]Ibid.

in the celebration of the sacraments and the participation and collaboration of the entire People of God.[28] Second, synodality talks about those specific ecclesial structures that are synodal in character, like the presbyteral councils of the dioceses at a local level and the episcopal conferences of bishops at the regional level.[29] Third, synodality are those events which are called upon by hierarchical authorities that hope to discuss pertinent issues on church life such as ecumenical councils and the synod of bishops.[30]

The ITC document, according to one of the drafters in the sub-committee, Piero Coda said that it was a normal theological development for synodality to find its roots. There was nothing revolutionary in the document, for there were no ruptures with the past.[31] The document gives a better understanding of synodality. However, there needs to be constant updating and reflection on synodality as well as deliberate attempts to make it visible in the life of the Church both at the local and universal levels. Pope Francis, for one, has been promoting and practicing it in his Petrine ministry.

## Pope Francis and Synodality

Pope Francis is the Supreme Pontiff who truly lived up to what synodality is all about. From the beginning of his pontificate, he had already shown the world what it was like to have a synodal pope. After all, he is the Pope from the world's farthest

[28]Ibid., 70.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Andrea Gagliarducci, "International Theological Commission document proposes lived synodality," *Catholic News Agency,* 17 May 2018, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/38432/international-theological-commission-document-proposes-lived-synodality.

ends.[32] When he was shown for the first time on the balcony of St. Peter's, what he did stun everyone. Instead of giving first his blessing as Pope, he asked the people gathered at the *piazza* to bless and pray for him. He said: "And now I would like to give the blessing, but first - first I ask a favor of you: before the Bishop blesses his people, I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me: the prayer of the people asking the blessing for their Bishop."[33] This was the first time in recent memory that a pope did this. Also, in that first greeting from the central loggia of St. Peter's, he reminded everyone that his pontificate would be a journey of togetherness, a journey with the people. He said: "This journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches [is a] journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us."[34]

## His Encyclicals and Exhortations

Pope Francis has been consistent from the very start of his pontificate that we need a Church that listens as it is missioned to the ends of the world. Therefore, there must be some changes in attitude in the Church wherein structures become more inclusive rather than exclusive. He said: "The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship

[32]Pope Francis, First Greeting of the Holy Father Francis, 13 March 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130313_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

with himself."[35] In *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis lays out his vision for the Church, one that is "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets."[36] If the Church were to be a missionary, it must go forth to where the people are and listen to them. Moreover, his encyclical *Laudato Si* goes beyond listening to people as it encourages everyone to listen to the "cry of the earth."[37] For in listening to the cry of the earth, the cry of the poor who are the most vulnerable in the changing of the climate can be heard. Indeed, Pope Francis has been an advocate of genuine listening, which is an important aspect of synodality.

As a Jesuit, Pope Francis is very familiar with what discernment is - part of it is knowing, understanding, and respecting the contexts of people. In this regard, the Pope has been very clear. Encountering people means meeting them where they are. In his post-synodal exhortation on the youth, he reminded the young that being who they are is more important than any other treasure in the world.[38] By being who we are, we acknowledge how uniquely God has created us. The Pope furthered: "You can become what God your Creator knows you are, if only you realize that you are called to something greater."[39] From

[35]Pope Francis, *On The Proclamation Of The Gospel In Today's World (Evangelii Gaudium)*, 24 November 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[36]Ibid., no. 49.

[37]Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si)*, 24 May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, no.49.

[38]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and the Entire People of God (Christus Vivit)*, 25 March 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html, no. 107.

[39]Ibid., no. 107.

this uniqueness, there comes diversity, especially in terms of expressing our relationship with God.

In his encyclical *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis emphasized that there can be different forms and expressions of holiness from different backgrounds. For one, the heroic virtues of the saints and martyrs are great examples. However, the daily, honest, and dignified work of simple people can also be a source of inspiration when it comes to holiness. "Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence."[40] Holiness is not a one-and-done deal but a living, dynamic response to a God who loves us.

Understanding the contexts of others can be vividly seen in how Pope Francis addressed the issues raised in the Synod on the Family. In *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope reminded "that there is a need 'to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations' and 'to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.'"[41] Here the Pope was emphasizing a more pastoral response to those divorced and remarried Catholics. They must also be given a chance to participate in ecclesial activities. "No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel,"[42] the Pope remarked. However, *Amoris Laetitia*, while welcomed by those estranged from the Church, was heavily criticized by some groups as it seemed to have changed the standing teaching on the reception of communion

[40]Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 7.

[41]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family (Amoris Laetitia)*, 19 March 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, no. 296.

[42]Ibid., no. 297.

by divorced and remarried Catholics. Nevertheless, these are voices that still must be heard and considered.

Furthermore, Pope Francis has been at the forefront when it comes to respecting cultures. In his post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* he said that "any project for the Amazon region, there is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposed an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their own culture."[43] The Pope asks everyone in the region which is home to many indigenous peoples to respect each other's cultural history and always consider the contexts of each human person.

True to his name, Pope Francis has always left a spot in his heart for those at the margins. He has consistently and deliberately placed the poor at the center of his ministry. He had clearly outlined this in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he said that "if the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception. But to whom should she go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much our friends and wealthy neighbors, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, "those who cannot repay you" (*Lk* 14:14)."[44] For the Pope, it is important that those who are at the fringes of society are also called upon to participate. Participation is reserved not only for those with power or authority but especially for those who are powerless and seemingly insignificant.

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[43]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the People of God and to all Persons of Goodwill (Querida Amazonia)*, 2 February 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.

[44]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 48.

Finally, in *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope devoted a chapter discussing strangers. Reflecting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the Pope highlighted the need to transcend barriers preventing someone from helping another. "Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group. In this case, the Samaritan became a neighbor to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers."[45] For the Pope, no one is dispensable. Everyone is necessary. In a synodal church, the voices of everyone, no matter how they vary, are part of the dialogue. Part of the evangelizing mandate of Jesus is also to listen to others, especially to the voiceless. "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our comfort zone to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel."[46]

## His Papal Ministry

Before Pope Francis mentioned synodality, he had already been practicing it himself. One thing that was clear to him when he was elected pope was the need to ensure that the Vatican Curia was transparent enough, especially when it came to financial resources, and that it could respond well to the needs of the Universal Church. For this, in 2013, he formed a council of cardinals that would help him oversee the administration of the Curia. This Council of Cardinal Advisers comprises eight cardinals from different parts of the world. Their first order

[45]Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (Fratelli Tutti)*, 3 October 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

[46]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 20.

of business was to look into the Curia, review it, and reform it.[47] This is one of the many examples of how he considers his Petrine ministry. For him, collaborating with others is an essential part of governing, and listening well to the inputs of others helps him greatly in exercising his responsibility.

For Pope Francis, to be pope means to be of service to all, and because the pope is a servant, he is not above everyone, but instead, below them. Therefore, the image that comes to mind is an inverted pyramid where the apex or the top is found below.[48] Through this, the pope truly becomes the servant of the servants of God (*servus servorum Dei*). "It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles."[49]

During the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said that synodality is a "constitutive element" of the Church, and through it, the hierarchical ministry can be better understood. For him, the hierarchy must know how to listen to the lay faithful, which is an essential part of the ministerial function of the clergy as servants. Therefore, he asks: "But how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their

[47]John Hooper, "Pope Francis to revolutionize running of church with new advisory panel," *The Guardian*, 14 April 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/14/pope-francis-church-advisory-panel.

[48]Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Speeches, 17 October 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

[49]Ibid.

sorrows, and their anguish?"[50] Listening intently to everyone in the Church makes the Church a truly synodal Church.

## The Synod on Synodality

On 21 May 2021, the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops announced that its Sixteenth General Assembly would take on the theme of synodality. However, unlike other celebrations of the Synod of Bishops, it would be a three-year path on which all particular churches will participate through various levels and processes of dialogue.[51] Pope Francis, through this synod, wished to re-capture what synodality is all about in light of the lived experiences of the various local churches in the world. This aligns with what he highlighted in his speech during the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops. He said that it is the synodal path by which the Church of the Third Millennium is called to journey.[52]

In the *Vademecum* prepared for the initial phase of the synodal process, it was mentioned that the objective was to listen together to the Holy Spirit through God's Word and the experiences of each other. This would, in turn, inspire everyone in the Church to continue dreaming and hoping for a better human family journeying together. This would hopefully result in the renewal and reorientation of ecclesial structures wherein everyone can participate and exercise

[50]Ibid.

[51]Salvatore Cernuzio, "Synod of Bishops will begin in the local Churches," *Vatican News*, 21 May 2021, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/synod-of-bishops-will-begin-in-the-local-churches.html

[52]Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (Paul VI Audience Hall, 17 October 2015).

co-responsibility.[53] Thus, the basic questions were: "How does this "journeying together" take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take to grow as a synodal Church?"[54] From here, the journey toward greater communion, more participation, and a truly mission-oriented Church begins.

With the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," the synodal process would not like to produce voluminous documents but to have a shared experience of journeying, listening, and discerning together. Communion is always our call as we are created by a Trinitarian God. Together, "we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share."[55] Moreover, Participation is based on the giftedness of each other and using such gifts for the good of the Church.[56] Furthermore, the mission is God's collective call to everyone to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth, and that includes the different strata of everyday life.[57]

Pope Francis solemnly opened the synodal journey with a Holy Mass at St. Peter's Basilica on 10 October 2021. In his homily, he highlighted three actions that can guide everyone on this journey: encounter, listen, and discern. For him, to encounter means looking others "in the eye" and allowing oneself to be open to listening to the stories of others. To listen, meanwhile, meant not only using one's ears but, most

[53]Secretary General of Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, no. 11.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., no. 13.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

important, one's heart.[58] And finally, to discern is "to look within, in the light of the love that the Lord himself had shown by his gaze."[59] These three verbs could hopefully aid the entire Church in these years of grace-filled encounters with the Lord and His people.

## Synodality in the CBCP

When one reviews the history of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), it can be gleaned that the bishops' conference has come a long way. For more than 50 years, together with the changing and developing Philippine society, the CBCP has transformed, renewed, and refashioned itself to become more immersed among the people and adept at how it shepherds.

Taking a cue from the changes ushered in by the Vatican II, the Philippine bishops took seriously the fact that they are part of the People of God and not separate from it. Before becoming ministers, they belong to and share with the common priesthood of all the members of the Church. Therefore, even in their ministry as shepherds of the particular flock entrusted to them, they bear in mind the fundamental dignity that they share with the rest of the faithful.

## Towards Deeper Communion

The seeming distance and separation of the bishops from the people were quite noticeable in the nascent years of the CBCP, if their statements and letters would be the basis. Their ecclesiological viewpoint was more of *ad intra*. It was too internal and

[58]Pope Francis, *Homily on the Opening of the Synodal Path*, Homilies, 10 October 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

[59]Ibid.

even hierarchical that their letters were mostly concerned with how to defend the faith, explain their authority as leaders, and assert their position, especially on moral questions that affect Church and society. In this case, their statements and letters usually bore an authoritative tone, sometimes to the point of seemingly dictating what the faithful should do.

However, some of the bishops, if not most of them, realized that their voice should be one with the people, especially after Vatican II. They are guides more than guardians, pastors more than political figures, and shepherds more than dictators. After the devastating effects of World War II, it was during the Martial Law years that saw the CBCP become a moral and formidable force the people can depend on. It was also during the Marcos dictatorship that the bishops found themselves closer to the people, deliberately and explicitly advocating for human rights and genuine development. They began talking about human rights, freedom of speech, and genuine human development. The late Bishop Francisco Claver, SJ, the former bishop of Malaybalay in Bukidnon, was one prelate who did not hide his opposition to the dictatorial rule and its apparent alternative, the communist movement. John Carroll, SJ observed: "He took his stand as shepherd of his people, analyzing the local and national situation with his trademark calm but powerful language and even more powerful thought—always with the people, and their genuine development at the center of his concern."[60] Indeed, he always placed the people's welfare before his and that has become his legacy as a bishop.

For Claver, the people themselves needed to find their voice against the oppressing forces that enslave them. This would only happen if "the people themselves participate freely and

[60]John J. Carroll, SJ, "Bishop Claver's Vision of the Church," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 11.

conscientiously in the process from beginning to end..."[61] The people must constantly be aware of their environment and participate in its uplifting. Perhaps this principle of Bishop Claver was so inspiring and found resonance among the bishops that they asked him to draft the CBCP statement immediately after the snap elections of 1986.

Part of the said statement declared: "We, therefore, ask every loyal member of the Church, every community of the faithful, to form their judgment about the February 7 polls. And if, in faith, they see things as we, the bishops, do, we must come together and discern what appropriate actions to take that will be according to the mind of Christ. In a creative, imaginative way, under the guidance of Christ's Spirit, let us pray together, reason together, decide together, act together, always to the end that the truth prevail, that the will of the people be fully respected."[62]

These words from the bishops, apart from being historic, were groundbreaking. Not only did the bishops call for collective action but they did so by first appealing to the people to listen to their consciences and to discern the best course of action. Only when "they see things" as the bishops did could they unite and stand together to fight for the truth. According to Carroll, the bishops were not giving out directions but discernment; speaking not from the outside of the people but within.[63]

What Carroll noted above beautifully expressed what *Lumen Gentium* taught about the Church. Before any division because

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[61]Ibid., 12.

[62] Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Post-Election Statement," *CBCP Online*, 13 February 1986, https://cbcponline.net/post-election-statement/.

[63]Carroll, "Bishop Claver's Vision of the Church," 14.

of charism or ministry, everyone—the laity, religious, and the clergy—belong to the one People of God. It is a communion of people called by God to be with Him. This communion must be fostered and upheld in all aspects of the Church's life, especially in terms of the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy.

This relationship is deepened and nourished when everyone is considered "companions on the journey."[64] By appreciating each one as brothers and sisters, as members of one family who are on a journey to God, the relationship becomes more meaningful and goes beyond mere superficiality and functionality. The establishment of pastoral councils that include the laity, at both diocesan and parish levels, are concrete manifestations of this relationship and are avenues for the dynamic communion of everyone in the Church. In the end, this relationship must be geared towards a deeper communion in the Church. Hence, it begins with the acknowledgment that everyone has a role to play and a duty to fulfill so that the Church can flourish. It is not only the hierarchy that is bestowed upon with the charism of responsibility for the Church, but also the lay faithful. "They are [also] called to play an active role inasmuch as they share in the one priesthood of Christ."[65]

Like the first community in Jerusalem, the Apostles and the Elders were so close to the community that they knew what their needs were (Acts 4:32-35). In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles, they appointed seven reputable men who would assist them in taking care of the poor and widows (Acts 6:1-15) This kind of closeness is also what should characterize the relationship between the bishop and the people. In and through

[64]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 55.

[65]Ibid.

such communion, everyone can know each other and respond to each other's needs. Therefore, communion is essential in a community. Without it, there can only be individualism which will cause harm and discord in the community.

If the bishops become too distant and, worse, indifferent to the plight of the people, they would fail to respond to the needs of the flock entrusted to them. And the CBCP has used its collective voice to stand for the people, especially the poor. This closeness and solidarity were manifested in how the bishops sided with farmers as they fought for genuine land reform. When the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was on the brink of termination in 2008, eight bishops joined the farmers in a hunger strike asking the legislators to listen to them and heed their plea of extending the said program.[66] Aside from the many statements the CBCP issued on land reform, their gesture of joining the ranks of the farmers in their struggle to have a land of their own and a better life spoke eloquently and forcefully. There they showed their oneness and closeness with the people, especially those vulnerable and voiceless.

The document on synodality produced by the ITC outlined the important role of the bishop in promoting synodality. Since the bishop is the one elected by God to be the shepherd of a particular Church, he also becomes the assurance of its unity. He has the task of ensuring that the local Church's unity and its communion with other local Churches is binding and flourishing. This is manifested as they form a college together with the other bishops with the pope, as the successor of Peter, as the head. Their exercise of collegiality is a form of synodality.

[66]Union of Catholic Asian News, "Bishops, Priest Fast with Farmers for Land Reform," *UCANews*, 16 December 2008, https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2008/12/16/bishops-priest-fast-with-farmers-for-land-reform&post_id=49629.

According to the ITC, "Collegiality in the strict sense denotes the assertion and expression of the communion of the People of God in the ranks of Bishops, in other words in the college of Bishops *cum Petro et sub Petro,* and - through that - communion between all Churches."[67] When they gather together, they each bring the dreams and hopes and concerns of the flock assigned to them. In this way, they manifest their communion with their respective faithful, and this communion is further expressed through the unity and collegiality of bishops from all over the world. Thus, in this way, the particular Churches are listening and are listened to and the universal communion of the Church is vividly manifested.

## A Structure of Grace and Synodality

The Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) mentioned that sinful structures in society are a reality, but at the same time, structures of grace are evident as well. These are "groups and institutions that facilitate the entry of the Good News and of grace into the lives of people and the fabric of society."[68] These structures must be promoted and nurtured, for it is hoped that through these structures, a genuine renewal of Philippine society can be realized.

Without being explicitly mentioned in the Acts of PCP-II, the CBCP could be considered as a structure of grace helping and assisting and sometimes, even initiating, renewal, not only among the believers in the Philippines, but to the Filipino citizenry as a whole. The Philippine Constitution explicitly states

[67]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 66.

[68]Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees,* no. 657.

the principle of separation of Church and State. The bishops are fully aware of this fact and their role as shepherds, not as political leaders. Nevertheless, they are also cognizant that they can contribute something to the betterment of this society.[69] They can say something about either political matters without being partisan, or moral issues without being authoritarian. Hence, they have been a moral force advocating for genuine progress and integral development. They have become contemporary prophets not of doom but of God's Good News.

To be a structure of grace means to be an institution that radiates what the Gospel of Christ proclaims. It means to become a beacon of hope amid degrading poverty, of truth a midst the lies and deceit, and of charity in the face of indifference and apathy. However, this requires involvement in the lives of ordinary people. One cannot simply be a structure of grace if one is above and beyond the people. Therefore, the CBCP's transformation from an institution-preserving conference into a people-centered one is a mark of the bishops' awareness and resolve to place the people, especially the poor, at the center. Msgr. Pedro Quitorio III said: "The Conference made the daring leap from being an involved, albeit silent, participant in socio-political issues, to a major and proactive player in the arena of national concerns, undaunted and uncompromising in its fulfillment of the prophetic mission of the Church."[70]

According to the ITC, "synodality denotes those *structures* and *ecclesial processes* in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously

[69]Bishop Teodoro Bacani, Jr., "The Ecclesiology of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines," in *Anamnesis,* eds. Francisco Claver, SJ and Pedro Quitorio III (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1996), 186.

[70]Msgr. Pedro Quitorio III, ed., "Introduction," *On the Threshold of the Next Millennium* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1999), v.

on various levels: local, regional and universal."[71] The CBCP as the official, permanent institution of the bishops in the Philippines is a vivid expression of synodality. This gathering of the Philippine bishops, which meets on a bi-annual basis for their plenary assemblies, is a sure sign of the Church in the Philippines' synodal journey represented by their pastors. In these meetings, they update themselves on the realities from the ground, both local and national in scope, and issue guidance through pastoral statements or letters especially when necessary.

One example of this is how the Church advocates for the protection of the environment. Many areas in the Philippines are rich in mineral deposits but these areas are also home to vulnerable sectors of society. Across these dioceses, the Church has continued to consolidate efforts, not only from Church-oriented groups but also from non-government organizations and people's organizations, to protect the rich biodiversity and the source of livelihood of the people living in the affected areas. In 2005, the Philippine-Misereor Partnership Inc. (PMPI) spearheaded a nationwide campaign against large-scale mining. The campaign hoped to gather all organizations and Church groups to rally behind a common advocacy against mining activities in the Philippines. Notably, this campaign was unique because of the "prominent participation of Church leaders and organizations."[72]

Furthermore, the bishops of Eastern Visayas have been outspoken in terms of their opposition to mining activities in the region. In a statement in 2010, they decried the granting

[71]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 70.

[72]Anna Marie Karaos, "The Church and the Environment," in *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 55.

of permits to explore and of mining production sharing agreements in the islands of Samar, Leyte, and Biliran as well as the small islands of Manicani and Homonhon. They said that the continuing destruction caused by mining activities only had "adverse effects to [the people's] livelihood, to their well-being as persons and as families, to the quality of life in their communities and to their very own dignity as people of God."[73] The bishops were after the preservation of the environment and the welfare of the people, of the flock they have been entrusted to serve.

Certainly, the bishops, in particular of Eastern Visayas, would not simply make those assertions without seeing what is truly happening in those affected areas. In a report by CNN Philippines, Rebeca Destajo, a barangay councilor and anti-mining advocate from Manicani Island, lamented the environmental destruction caused by the open-pit mining of Nickel Asia Philippines on the island. When heavy rains come, siltation and pollution affect their livelihood. Also, aside from environmental destruction, familial conflicts and division in the community happen which show another aspect of the mining's ill effects.[74] Fr. Caesar Garcia, then parish priest of Manicani, noted that "if the ecosystem in Manicani is totally destroyed, there will be no other source of livelihood for the

[73]Archbishop Jose Palma, et.al., "A call to stop mining in Eastern Visayas region," *PhilStar Global*, 1 November 2010, https://www.philstar.com/other-sections/letters-to-the-editor/2010/11/01/625774/call-stop-mining-eastern-visayas-region.

[74]Anna Bueno, "How mining affects the lives of people in Eastern Samar," *CNN Philippines*, 1 December 2017, https://www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/politics/2017/12/01/mining-eastern-samar.html.

people here."[75] This is why Borongan Bishop Crispin Varquez had been consistent in opposing any mining activities in the islands of Manicani and Homonhon, which are under his jurisdiction. In 2012, he said: "People are the ones suffering and these very aggressive mining operations here are dividing our people. It is very painful that communities are divided considering its temporary economic benefits and the irreparable damage mining would create."[76]

These kinds of reports are listened to by the Philippine bishops which prompted them to write pastoral statements such as "What Is Happening To Our Beautiful Land?" in 1988 and "A Statement on Mining Issues and Concerns" in 2006. By becoming aware of what is happening in the daily and ordinary lives of the people, they can bring their concerns to a wider platform and allow those stories to be heard by more people, especially those in power. Therefore, when the bishops immerse and allow themselves to be affected by the plight of their people and bring these to their conference which is the CBCP, individually, they embody what synodality is and collectively, express this synodality. As the ITC remarkably says: "The importance of Episcopal Conferences in promoting the synodal journey of the People of God lies in the fact that 'the individual Bishops represent each his own Church.'"[77]

### Challenges to Listening

[75]CBCP News, "Borongan bishop, clergy want mining closed in Manicani," *CBCP News*, accessed 20 December 2022, https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/borongan-bishop-clergy-want-mining-closed-in-manicani/.

[76]Jerome Aning, "Bishop urges Aquino to stop all mining in Eastern Samar," *Inquirer.net*, 2 February 2012, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/138621/bishop-urges-aquino-to-stop-all-mining-in-eastern-samar.

[77] International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 90.

Arguably, the statements and letters issued by the CBCP are sought after and sometimes become sensational. Thanks to news media outlets that carry them. However, some statements did become controversial. In 2012, the CBCP made a clear stance against the then Reproductive Health Bill. It was a contentious issue that arrived at a point of extreme polarization between those in favor and those against. The bishops exhausted all means they could to prevent the bill from passing and turning into law but to no avail. In December 2012, the late President Benigno Aquino III signed the measure into law.[78]

During and after this debacle, some commentators observed that perhaps the influence of the Philippine bishops was now wavering. Others said that the bishops used up much political capital and yet were defeated. Fr. Eric Marcelo Genilo, SJ, said: "Some Catholics are now less likely to accept the CBCP's pronouncements at face value and are more ready to disagree with the Church than before."[79] However, regardless of the outcome, there were a lot of things to be learned from that experience. It was a wake-up call for the bishops of the Philippines whenever similar contentious issues arise in society. Should they get themselves involved? Surely, since they have a prophetic role to fulfill. But up to what point? And what can they learn from the RH Bill (or Law) experience?

During the debates on the RH Bill, some groups who professed that they are Catholics and yet supportive of the bill were formed. Some of these groups were Catholics for RH and some professors from the Ateneo de Manila University

[78]Rappler.com, "President Aquino signs RH bill into law," *Rappler*, 28 December 2012, https://www.rappler.com/nation/18728-aquino-signs-rh-bill-into-law/.

[79]Eric Marcelo Genilo, "Epilogue: The Church of PCP-II after the RH Bill Debate," *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* Eds. Eric Marcelo Genilo, et al, eds. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 178.

who made a statement days before Congress voted on the measure.[80] What was clear during those times was how divided the Catholics themselves were over the issue. Bishop Vicente Navarra, then bishop of Bacolod, even campaigned against candidates who were supportive of the measure. They placed big-sized tarpaulins at the Bacolod Cathedral's facade bearing the names of those who were for and against RH Bill and tagged them as Team *Buhay* and Team *Patay* respectively.[81]

Indeed, what happened during the RH bill issue divided people. According to Genilo, the virtually endless "debates between Catholic leaders and proponents of the RH Bill have caused fragmentation and animosity within the Church community and a diminishment of the hierarchy's moral authority in society."[82] Some people, especially believers, now think that some of the bishops have expressed too much opposition that they forgot what it meant to be shepherds. For them, they failed to listen to what the people were saying and forgot to uphold the common good. The supporters believed that the RH Bill was compatible with the Church's stand on the principle of the common good and the primacy of conscience.

Nevertheless, this contentious issue was a learning experience for the Philippine Church, especially for the bishops. While artificial contraception is not allowed in Catholic morality, some bishops, if not the CBCP, failed to consider that not all are Catholics in the Philippines despite being the majority. Also, the presence of those Catholics who supported the measure

[80]Shanice Garcia, "160 Ateneo professors push for RH Bill," 15 August 2012, https://theguidon.com/1112/main/2012/08/160-ateneo-professors-push-for-rh-bill/.

[81]Tech Tupas, "SC rules in favor of Bacolod diocese on 'Team Patay,' 'Team Buhay' posters," *Inquirer.net*, 21 January 2015, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/667048/sc-rules-in-favor-of-bacolod-diocese-on-team-patay-team-buhay-posters.

82Genilo, *Epilogue*, 169.

was an indication of the voices that were not listened to and considered. They were members of the Church who were not ready to accept the stand of the bishops in this regard. When divisive issues such as the RH Bill come to the fore, what should be the primary action of the CBCP?

Perhaps what was lacking in the stand of the bishops was how grounded they were to the realities of people's daily life on this particular issue. Supporters of the bill argued that the lack of access to reproductive health in the countryside often resulted in the deaths of mothers and infants. Teenage pregnancies were rising due to a lack of enough information on reproductive health among the young.[83] Also, the bishops' side was not heard enough because of the too much noise lingering in the public sphere. Criminalizing conscientious objectors was infringing on religious freedom. Appropriating funds for reproductive health might only line the pockets of a few and would only contribute to the worsening corruption situation in the country.[84] These ideas seemed to have fallen on deaf ears as the debate only heated and raged on. What everyone missed out on is what the ITC calls "an effective methodology of participation, with appropriate procedures for consulting the faithful and acceptance of different ecclesial experiences

[83]Individual Faculty of Ateneo De Manila University, "Declaration of Support for House Bill 4244 (The Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill) by individual faculty of the Ateneo de Manila University," *Spot.ph*, 13 August 2012, https://www.spot.ph/newsfeatures/51712/160-ateneo-professors-release-statement-expressing-support-for-rh-bill.

[84]Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Choosing Life, Rejecting The RH Bill," *CBCP Online*, 30 January 2011, https://cbcponline.net/choosing-life-rejecting-the-rh-billa-pastoral-letter-of-the-catholic-bishops-conference-of-the-philippines/.

in the phase of working out the pastoral orientations that have come from Episcopal Conferences."[85]

Indeed, there seemed to be a failure of peaceful and objective consultation on how the problems the RH Bill was trying to resolve. It only appeared to be a power showdown between the bishops and the politicians, between those for and against. According to the ITC, "the renewal of the Church's synodal life demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God."[86] Therefore, what is hopefully envisioned is a consultative Church where all voices are listened to even those who oppose or are in doubt about the Church's stand on moral issues. Furthermore, when proper consultation among the laity happens, this helps enhance the episcopal collegiality in their "implementation of synodality."[87]

Listening should always be part of the Church's structure and process. Synodality requires a Church that listens, for it is in listening that we can foster greater and deeper communion. By listening, a person can empathize with others, and understand and learn from them. On the part of the CBCP, listening will be a mark of genuine solidarity even if at times it is inconvenient and time-consuming to do so. According to Eleanor Dionisio, "Solidarity must involve seeing from the perspectives of the people the everyday problems they face which make it difficult for them to fall in line."[88]

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[85]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,* no. 90.

[86]Ibid., no. 65.

[87]Ibid., no. 90.

[88]Eleanor Dionisio, "Who Speaks for the Church?: Catholic Cacophony in the Reproductive Health Debate," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 33.

Moving forward, a listening Church and, therefore, a listening hierarchy becomes essential in the building up of God's kingdom for it fosters a spirit of discernment. Discernment requires communion with God and with others. It means becoming aware and sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in and through the life of each individual and of the community. Thus, discernment is not only the duty of bishops but of all members of the Church.[89] Consequently, listening is the duty of each member of the Church. It must be remembered that through Baptism, one share equally in the common priesthood of all the faithful. With listening, in the spirit of synodality, "the equality of all in the Church, preached so eloquently by Vatican II and PCP-II, would become a reality, and the Church would become truly communion."[90]

[89]Roberto Rivera, SJ, "A Discerning Community: The Philippine Church and Electoral Politics, 1986-2010," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 84.

[90]Dionisio, "Who Speaks for the Church?," 36.

# CONVERSATIONS BY THE WELL: A LESSON ON SYNODALITY

*Aldo Miguel Constantino M. Bonifacio*

## The Synodal Path of Healing

Weeks before the opening of the Synod, Pope Francis addresses the diocese of Rome with a quote from Gustav Mahler, "Fidelity to tradition does not consist in worshiping ashes but in keeping a fire burning."[1] He then asks, "What are you more inclined to do: guard the ashes of the Church, in other words, your association or group, or keep the fire burning?"[2]

The Pope paints a haunting image — *ashes of the Church* — to address traditionalism. This shackle prevents the Church from continuing the pilgrim nature of the apostolic tradition and turns her into "a lovely pious association [that] keeps the Holy Spirit in a cage."[3] This image, it would seem, is also meant to illustrate other restraints that bind the Church: rigidity that restricts God's *makrothymìa* (his patient, profound, broad, and farsighted way of seeing things)[4] and sovereignty, detachment from the marginalized, complacency and clericalism, as well as other manacles gripping the ordained community. These statements make it very clear that the Church is in crisis, and she is in need of much healing.[5]

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[1]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, Speeches, 18 September 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

The healing agenda of the Synod on Synodality is as overt and captivating as the Pope's daring use of language. Regardless of how one may react to such explicit declarations, what is clear is that it consistently demands one's full attention to the many wounds plaguing humanity: the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions of immigrants and persecuted Christians, the blight of inequality and the polarization of beliefs, environmental threats, climate change, and the pervasive reality of poverty and radical ideologies.[6] Now, this is not at all out of the ordinary as the Church has, in her history, remained a steady source of morality and spirituality, albeit imperfect and thoroughly subject to the cosmic rules of history (such as the painful gift of hindsight.) What signals a change, or a movement, is how it constantly asserts new perspectives on the synod's purpose, "to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, [and] give strength to our hands."[7]

The Official Handbook of the Synod for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches expresses this change more clearly:

> One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the institution of the Synod of Bishops. While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path

[6]Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, 7 September 2021, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf, no. 5-8.

[7]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People*, Speeches, 3 October 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html.

> for the entire People of God. Hence, the Synodal Process is no longer only an assembly of bishops but a journey for all the faithful, in which every local Church has an integral part to play.[8]

For any student of Catholic Church history, this signals a departure from the Church's prior hierarchical emphasis on papal authority (Ultramontanism).[9] It is also a turn away from previous expectations set upon the laity wherein their functions within the Church are aptly contained in the denigrating aphorism—pay, pray, and obey. What has been known as Vatican II's landmark teaching on having a more porous ecumenical approach[10] seems to have taken an even more open, inclusive, and accessible form.

In its declaration that every single member of the Church, both lay and ordained, is now part of the Synodal process, it strongly affirms and enacts the Second Vatican Council's teaching that "all the baptized, both the hierarchy and the laity, are called to be active participants in the saving mission of the Church (LG, 32-33)."[11] It also extends its call for participation not only amongst Catholics who are active in their local parishes, organizations, or other Catholic communities but also to those who are often at risk of being excluded (women,

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[8]Synod on Synodality, *Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality*, 7 September 2021, https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html, no. 1.3.

[9]The *New Dictionary of Theology* defines ultramontanism as follows: "describes the theological movement which placed a strong emphasis on the authority of the papacy in matters of doctrine and ecclesiastical government." Cf. Frederick J. Cwiekowski, "Ultramontanism," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 2014 ed., eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications India, 2014), 1064-1065.

[10]Joaquin Yap, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II" (Lecture Notes, Quezon City, 2019), 4.

[11]Synod on Synodality, *Vademecum on Synodality*, 1.3.

the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty) including individuals who rarely practice their faith, and those who no longer do,[12] commonly known as the disaffiliated.[13]

Suppose these statements are not enough to convince us that the papacy has left the pulpit and that the Church no longer hides behind a veil of innocence or speaks from a dais of perfection. In that case, then a solemn display of her deepest wounds may convince us otherwise:

> However, we cannot hide from the fact that the Church herself must face the lack of faith and the corruption even within herself. In particular, we cannot forget the suffering experienced by minors and vulnerable people "due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons." We are continually challenged "as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit." For too long, the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently. These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal, for which forgiveness can never be asked for enough, and which constitute obstacles, sometimes imposing ones, to advancing in the direction of "journeying together."[14]

What is most astonishing about these assertions is that the Church no longer excludes herself as an object of concern. She does instead, quite dramatically, claim her weaknesses, wounds, and sins, addressing her own distance and, I daresay,

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[12]Ibid., 2.1.

[13]Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics, a study by Saint Mary's Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2017), 5.

[14]Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, 6.

her own disaffiliation.[15] In more ways than one, when the documents ask us to "allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the community's life without being hindered, rejected or judged,"[16] the Church it would seem, is also speaking of herself. She is asking us to dialogue away from bejeweled rostrums, pleading for our sympathy, for the gavel to be held with the tender hand of empathy and compassion instead of the callousness of indifference.[17] One could even say she places herself front and center, ready to receive our confrontations, and at the same time, she is also at the very end of the line, stooped, bloody, and bowed in hopeful anticipation for any consolation that comes her way.

The Church's bravery, of course, has not been free of controversy and has met strong opposition, concerns that this paper will not tackle. Instead, it chooses to assent and listen to her wisdom with meekness and joy. In other words, we will approach her painful disclosure with an open heart and mind.

This leads us to formulate two principles that we believe are necessary for synodality: [1] only when we understand the nature of our unbelonging can we truly discover the nature of our belonging; [2] and that meeting the other where they are goes both ways. But first, we must remove from ourselves any notion that what we are proposing is easy. It most certainly is

[15]This insight, which serves as a key element for this paper, was inspired by Markus Locker when he asked (during the initial defense panel) whether the Church needed to admit her own shortcomings for healing to transpire. Aside from providing the inspiration, he also supplied the needed courage to tackle it in this paper.

[16]Francis, *Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Opening of the Synodal Path*, Homilies, 10 October 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

[17]The emphasis on empathy and compassion throughout this paper was inspired by Ted Gonzales SJ.

not. The synodal journey requires modesty and grit. It is not a journey for the faint of heart, nor is it for hardened ones. At least on paper, the Church, led by the Pope, seems prepared for the journey ahead. Her shoes, worn. Her cloak, torn (Acts 12:8). Her spirit, ever ready and ever strong (Mt 26:41). She is ready for the synodal path, a path paved with the blood, sweat, tears, and spirit of the lamb that is meant for all of us: the ordained and the laity, the learned and the unwise, the hungry, the satisfied, the healthy and the addict, the poor, the well-kept, the recognized, and the discarded.

"W*e are the Church, all of us together,*"[18] cries the heir of Peter as the cock crows.

We shall begin exploring these paradoxes by engaging two brave characters who, we may say, teach us synodality's quintessence. Let us join Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in their conversation by the well.

## Jesus and the Woman from Samaria

In his commentary, Francis Moloney divides the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman into two sections. The first (4:1-15) consists of the general introduction and setting of the encounter and the initial discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman on water. The following section (4:16-30) focuses on the question of the person of Jesus and proper worship.[19] For our reading, we will also divide it into two sections, but we will skip the general introduction and setting:

> 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said
> to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the
> city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him,

[18]Francis, *Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome* (18 Sept. 2021).

[19]Francis J. Moloney, "The Gospel of John," *Sacra Pagina*, vol.4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: 1998), 114-136.

> "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (John 4:7-9 NRSV)

The story begins by showing us that the Samaritan woman is fully aware of the genuine distance between her (a Samaritan and a woman) and Jesus (a man and a Jew.) In that distant time, we can say neither of these characters belonged in the transpiring scene. The absurdity of it all was not only recognized by the author, who felt the need to clarify for the reader, but also by the disciples at the story's conclusion when they arrive astonished, left to wonder what the woman wanted or why Jesus was speaking with her (v. 27).[20]

What we are trying to point out here, concerning our assertion, is that in this scene, the Samaritan woman was possibly experiencing a state of unbelonging, which her response elucidated well. As identified by Father Moloney, her words had a nuance of mockery (v. 9a).[21] This is the only time Jesus is called an *Ioudaios* in the Fourth Gospel, and from the Samaritan perspective, the woman threw him a righteous insult—*pōs su Ioudaios*.[22] This is a critical insight in our reflection. Her response to this situation of unbelonging is one of shock and aggression, which we may say may have also been filled with fear and anger. Both characters were already fully aware of the unbelonging taking place, but she still felt the need to emphasize the scene's preposterousness — *you; a Jew; of me; a woman; of Samaria*?

The important part here is that the Samaritan woman engaged. She could have just ignored Jesus, left, and come back another time. If she did, then not only would we have missed out

[20]Ibid, 116-117.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

on this beautiful encounter, but so would the other Samaritans who benefited from her boldness considerably, as we will see at the end of the story. Though her initial disposition was found wanting, her engagement allowed for the freedom of grace to enter, which we can say was much more than what she could have possibly desired—water, a pail full, nothing more.

> [10] Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." [11] The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? [12] Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" [13] Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, [14] but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [15] The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." (4:10-15)

Immediately, we can recognize the consequence of the woman's off-putting engagement—grace. In her first engagement, she responds mockingly. Here, her disposition changes even though the situation observingly becomes more ludicrous. Jesus not only corrects her by claiming that rather than he, she is the one who should be asking for a drink, even though he is visibly incapable of providing any. Surprisingly, she is unfazed and addresses her inquiry now in a more respectful manner, "*Kyrie.*" Jew suddenly turns into a respectful – sir.[23] She continues to question him, to learn more about what he means, and she even does so rather argumentatively, "*...oute antlēma echeis, kai to phrear estin bathy; pothen oun echeis to hydōr*

[23]Ibid., 117-118.

*to zōn*?". She rushes to conclude the engagement by asking for the miracle water so that she may no longer experience thirst or be burdened by the means to quench it. But now, she is engaged in a much more open disposition; her curiosity piqued, her attention captured, and her life open to the possibility of being changed forever.

The second portion of this engagement begins rather remarkably with the familiar threefold prophetic command: *go, call,* and *come*.[24] It signals that this encounter between Jesus and the woman will take an incredible turn that will bridge two divided worlds, Samaritanism and Judaism.[25]

> [16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." [17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. [20] Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." (4:16-20)

As a result of her engagement, she is now locked in dialogue with Jesus, and they are no longer talking about water, living water, or wells. Immediately, Jesus breaks away from that narrative and reveals a secret we assume she kept well hidden.[26] There is an essential nuance in both her declaration that she had no husband and in Jesus' verification of this statement by his declaration that what she said was, in fact, true. What happened here was an exercise of truth-telling. It begins with a command by Jesus that leads to the woman revealing a truth, although only partially. Jesus then reveals a more profound

[24]Ibid., 127.

[25]Ibid., 128.

[26]Ibid., 126-128.

and painful truth about her, and he does it instantly without forgetting to commend her honesty. To use a famous saying, he gave credit where credit was due. In the initial exchange, what Jesus revealed to her was beyond her comprehension, thus resulting in her sudden desire for a conclusion, but revelations about the inner secrets of her life were almost impossible to deny.[27] She could not turn away.

Now, let us remember the absurdity of this entire scene. This, in the first place, should not be happening. With these revelations, this truth-telling that is going on, one would expect the woman to start lambasting Jesus for being rude and inappropriate and start referring to him once again as an *Ioudaios.* Instead, her curiosity and attention remain piqued and captured, decisively even more so. She responds, with even greater respect and now, with absolute wonder, "*Kyrie, theōrō hoti prophētēs ei sy.*"[28] No longer interested in her own life, she proceeds to questions of faith, tradition, religion, and the living embodiments of the spiritual beyond.

Again, let us pause to appreciate the farcicality and profundity of this exchange. Jesus revealed something deeply personal about her that could have made her justifiably indignant, yet her focus now turns from herself toward the man, the Jew, the stranger in front of her—Jesus. We have to take note of the progression here. In one conversation, Jesus, the son of the living God, the king of the universe, went from a mocked *Jew,* to a strange S*ir* and now, quite possibly, an intriguing *Sir-Prophet*. Only Jesus is capable of such things. Let us proceed.

> [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do

[27]Ibid., 127.

[28]Ibid., 127-128.

> not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." [25] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." (4:21-25)

Now, there are many things that we can identify here. First is to remember that the woman presented an argument for Samaritanism, and rightfully so. One would only expect that from a Samaritan. Jesus, though, as inclusive as he is in this entire engagement, speaks powerfully of the superiority of the Jewish traditions, unbending with the truth of Judaism.[29] He accommodates her and engages her when his own culture, in a way, demands him not to, yet his inclusivity remains grounded. He uses the plural we, while he criticizes the Samaritans and their practices with the plural you. That is a firm position, almost as strong as his claim that salvation is from the Jews.[30] There is, again, a clear distinction between the two characters. There is a reality of unbelonging that is being shared. But see, that is the thing; it is an unbelonging that is addressed and discussed. It is not hidden, not spoken of behind closed doors, not buried deep within one's heart and mind. It is an unbelonging that is being truthfully spoken without embellishment.

Of course, these strong statements by Jesus are prefaced with a previous accommodation. He brought her to a safe place first, so to speak, by addressing her for the first time in the entire encounter with an identifier, *gynai* or woman, which he follows with an affirmation that a time is coming when she will worship the Father. He acknowledges her personally, as much

[29]Ibid., 128.

[30]Ibid.

as he concedes God's rightful place as Father. This accommodation resumes once Jesus solidifies the Jewish position by disclosing an even greater revelation that would impact not only her but the rest of humanity. She once again misunderstands, utterly oblivious to the possibility that she is, in fact, speaking with Christ himself.

> [26] Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." [27] Just then, his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" [28] Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, [29] "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" [30] They left the city and were on their way to him. (4:26-30)

Here again, we can see this reality of unbelonging. Upon the arrival of the disciples, assumingly composed of primarily Jewish men, the woman immediately rushes off the scene, leaving behind her jar of water. Now, there are two apparent ways to observe this situation. One way is, just as we have mentioned, the woman felt uneasy, awkward, or uncomfortable and ran off to avoid further discomfort, supporting our assertion of the unbelonging that is happening. This is a common understanding of the situation and not a unique take. Another way is that the final revelation of Jesus so moved her that her only response was to flee haphazardly, leaving her precious water behind. Jesus' usage of the formula of revelation: *egō eimi ho legōn soi* ("'I AM' [is] the one speaking to you." Cf. NRSV: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you.")[31] already signals to us the immensity of his self-revelation. Could she have realized what this meant? Well, the fact that she questioned the identity of Jesus immediately after by asking if he was indeed the Messiah

[31]Ibid., 130.

shows us that she did not. Even more so, with her focus shifting from the ongoing theological debate to the revelation of everything she has ever done, which is another absurdity (an exaggeration of Jesus' revelation about her marital situation.)

But the woman does not need to understand everything. This exchange teaches us that having questions, misunderstanding, or wrestling with our faith and divine encounters is a crucial part of our faith journey that leads to grace. At the end of his life, Thomas Aquinas, famous for his incredible theological contributions to the Church, experienced this profoundly. After witnessing a beatific vision of the Lord, he declares, "The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me."[32] Knowledge and understanding are essential, but they are consequences, great consequences of that which is of utmost importance — our sincere engagement. This is true for the woman and Aquinas as much as it is true for us.

> [39] Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." [40] So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. [41] And many more believed because of his word. [42] They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (4:39-42)

[32]This quote from Thomas Aquinas was taken from the website *Catholic Answers*. I encountered this quote from the late Michael La Guardia SDB when I took the class Theo 273.1 – Studies in Medieval Theological Themes. Cf. Peggy Frye, "When St. Thomas Aquinas likened his work to straw, was that a retraction of what he wrote?" *Catholic.com,* accessed 13 March 2023, https://www.catholic.com/qa/when-st-thomas-aquinas-likened-his-work-to-straw-was-that-a-retraction-of-what-he-wrote.

The woman's willingness to engage in an encounter of truth-telling with Jesus and how he was able to listen to her compassionately led her to believe that He revealed *everything she had ever done*. Despite her situation (which was considered as that of an outcast, being married five times during that time), Jesus met her where she was by allowing her to meet him where he was. In that one encounter, she was heard, recognized, seen, and accepted, as she was also able to hear and see — beyond her hearing; beyond her seeing. The encounter between her and the Jew-Sir-Prophet-Messiah named Jesus brought two divided worlds toward oneness. It was her courage and humility that led others to believe in Him; it was her engagement that made all the difference.

This leads us to draw several conclusions that may aid our synodal journey.

## Lessons by the Well

The first is the importance of engagement and the disposition in which we choose to place ourselves. This pericope shows us that there is a way for us to encounter each other no matter how evident and robust the state of unbelonging is. What is crucial is our willingness to participate in the encounter and how accommodating we are to those taking part. Just as Jesus has shown, being accommodating does not mean bending the truths of our faith and traditions in order to prevent others from getting hurt or feeling rejected. There is a way to stand firm and committed to our beliefs while remaining inviting to questions and possible contestations. It is through our careful listening and our acknowledgment of realities that are begging to be acknowledged and having the courage to face them with an unbending resolve while having an accommodating disposition. This is how we journey together with mutual respect.

The second is that truth-telling leads to revelations of our innermost lives, which inevitably leads to pain as revelations of well-hidden things often do. The encounter between Jesus and the woman shows us that this is okay, and we must not be afraid of the pain that comes with it. In being honest with our own experience of unbelonging, whether to ourselves or the other, we find ourselves in common ground, which is a necessary starting point for any meaningful encounter. An obvious example is the discourse about the woman's past and what was lacking in her faith. But, what is not easily seen is how Jesus placed himself on equal footing with the woman; he was thirsty and needed drink (19:28).[33] He asked for help, just as the Church asks for our help. Just like the progression of the woman's way of identifying Jesus as Jew-Sir-Prophet-Messiah, true honesty removes the lies we at times so viciously attach to the other — disaffiliated, hypocrite, inauthentic, pretentious, lapsed, bigot, leftist, right-wing extremist, liberal, conservative — labels that further separate and disregard the truth of the other that is begging to be revealed. We must go beyond this and move toward relating with each other "not as a giant of our dreams, nor a dwarf of our fears, but as a person, part of a whole, with a share in its purpose."[34] This is how we live in synodality.

The third lesson is a new understanding of what Pope Francis has been requesting since the early days of his papacy — *to meet the other where they are.* The saying has often been understood from an evangelical perspective, where we are called to go to the margins, for the rich to encounter the poor, for priests to encounter the laity, and so on. What the Samaritan Woman and Jesus showed us in this beautiful exchange is that it goes both

[33]This insight came from Francis Alvarez SJ.

[34]Taken from the Daytop Creed.

ways. Jesus, dragging his band of derring-do do-gooders with him, travels to a distant land in order to meet the Samaritan Woman.[35] Just as the Woman, carrying her burdens, fears, and anxieties, traversed the great walls of indifference to remain in dialogue with the Jew-Sir-Prophet. What this story shows us is that, indeed, the other also has to meet us where we are. But this is not the only meaning of this assertion we are making.

Through this Synod on Synodality and the Church's painful disclosure of what we have called her own disengagement or disaffiliation, we must also meet her where she is. We must also carry out an accommodating disposition while remaining firm in our complaints and misgivings, headstrong with our awareness of her faults and mistakes. But we must not disregard her unbending truths, strengths, divine qualities, and undeniable humility. We must be ready to withhold our judgments, unclench our fists, soften our voices, and temper our sharp tones. There is a state of unbelonging between the Church and her flock; we are all aware of the distance, and its absurdity has left many of us astonished. The Church is ready to address and discuss this unbelonging with us, no longer hidden and spoken of behind closed doors. She has spoken of it truthfully without embellishment, no longer buried deep in her heart and mind. The question is, how are we going to respond?

Earlier, we stated that the logical explanation and common understanding for the woman's quick exit is due to the disciples' arrival. This, we claimed, she may have done haphazardly, which may be evidenced by the jar of water she left behind. Another way of understanding what may have happened is she was so moved by the encounter that she could not contain her excitement and ran off to share the experience with her

[35]This insight came from Markus Locker.

community. But if we look closely, we may be able to identify that the woman was presented with an obstacle prior to her enthusiastic return. The clue is in the setting of the encounter — it happened at noon.[36]

The time of the encounter tells us that the woman may have been an outcast. She made sure to be by the well when no one else would be around. Now, we cannot immediately assume that she was a loose woman since contemporary interpretations shed light on the intricacies of levirite marriage. But, we can safely make the assumption that she was experiencing a significant amount of shame, that she was in a state of unbelonging with the community, and that she was, in her own right, disengaged or disaffiliated.

So, what could have made her forget about her genuine shame and allowed her to return to the community she felt she did not belong to? It was the experience of grace that led to her surrender. Her encounter with Jesus allowed her to let go of her shame, worries, fears, misconceptions, and pride — her unbelonging. With the help of imagination, we can even say the moment she left her jar of water was when she finally knew she belonged, when she finally surrendered.[37]

Pope Francis alluded to this type of surrender at Benediction Hall when he recalled the story of Naaman, a valiant general of the Syrian army known for capturing fame, power, esteem, honors, and glory. Yet, beneath the glitter of his armor was "a frail, wounded, and diseased humanity."[38] He was a leper. Naaman is a mirror to all of us, especially those whose armors

[36]This insight came from Francis Alvarez, SJ.

[37]This insight came from Francis Alvarez, SJ.

[38]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia*, Speeches, 23 December 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/december/documents/20211223-curia-romana.html (accessed 8 March 2023).

are well-worn and meticulously adorned with achievements, rhetoric, gifts, talents, and skills. "Sometimes great gifts are the armor that covers great frailties..." says the Pope. "[But] we cannot spend our lives hiding behind armor, a role we play, or social recognition; in the end, it hurts us. The moment comes in each individual's life when he or she desires to set aside the glitter of this world's glory for the fullness of an authentic life, with no further need for armor or masks."[39]

What the Pope is trying to teach us, or rather, is reminding us, is that to be vulnerable is imperative to being Christian. And sharing our vulnerability is imperative to finding common ground, to finding each other. Pope Francis understands this when he sharply says, "Once we strip ourselves of our robes, our prerogatives, positions, and titles, all of us are lepers, all of us are in need of healing."[40] The Pope, once again, pierces our steel by showing us that underneath the glitter, our armors are made with serrated surfaces, their edges jagged and spiked. Inside, all of us are the same: lepers through each other's sins, victims of each other's indifference.

Indeed, as we have seen, revelation and faith, oneness in God and with one another, may be found in places of isolation and desolation, in places of unbelonging, as long as there is openness, willingness, and space for grace to enter. This truth has been revealed many times in scripture, though many of us seem to have forgotten. Jesus and the Samaritan Woman reminds us of that.

It is by the well underneath the scorching heat of the sun. It is beneath the loneliness of the distant fig tree. It is through the constant denial until the cock crows. And it is through forty

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

years of wandering in endless sand — our faith has always been found in places of unbelonging. Grace always finds us in exile.

So, once again, how must we respond to the synodal call? How must we walk the synodal path?

> We gather by the well, where all and none belong.
>
> And when the dark settles with its haunting
>
> We meet the other as they are;
>
> Where the fire burns — ever so brightly.
>
> We keep the fire burning.

# A FRAMEWORK FOR CHRISTIAN SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT FROM THE WRITINGS OF DEAN BRACKLEY, SJ: SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

*Edryan Paul J. Colmenares, SJ*

The late Jesuit moral theologian Dean Brackley, in his book *Divine Revolution*, sought to clearly establish the links between liberation and salvation. Brackley observed that salvation is traditionally understood mainly as forgiveness of one's own sins.[1] Instead, he argues that Catholic theology "can and should interpret salvation as liberation from all that dehumanizes us and as the fullness of life in communion with God and others."[2] Sobrino remarked that one of the contributions made by Brackley in his book *Divine Revolution* is his "return to Christ" and Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God.[3] In this article, we will explore the scriptural and theological foundations of Brackley's framework beginning with his study of Jesus and the proclamation of the Reign of God. Then, we will examine the assertions that modern theologians make, which he incorporates into the theological grounding of his framework for Christian social involvement.

[1]Dean Brackley, *Divine Revolution: Salvation & Liberation in Catholic Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 14.

[2]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, xxi.

[3]Jon Sobrino, foreword to *Divine Revolution: Salvation & Liberation in Catholic Thought,* by Dean Brackley (New York: Orbis, 1996), xii-xiii.

## Jesus and the Reign of God

When Brackley examines the Scriptures to elucidate his thesis, he focuses on Jesus and his proclamation of the Reign of God, a key message in the public ministry of Jesus.[4] We will examine how the expression "Reign of God" points to God's qualities, and then we shall explore how it is used concerning the socio-historical context of the poor during Jesus' time. Before outlining what the Reign of God is all about, Brackley notes how the Reign of God reveals God's characteristics already contained in the Old Testament.[5]

## God as King and His Kingly Activity

The expression "Kingdom of God" is better understood not as a place but as a reference to God and His activity as King.[6] Although Jesus Himself spoke about entering it, the space where God's reign and His blessings emerge is not necessarily a geo-political entity.[7] It is better understood as an event as it also refers to a reality unfolding in the present but will find its fulfillment in the future. While this famous translation of *hē basileia tou theou* as the Kingdom of God is misleading, one has to understand the phrase primarily in terms of the ruler and His relationship with those He rules.[8]

Brackley believes God as King reveals God as *hesed wa emet* doing *mishpat* and *sedeqah*. Brackley uses Berkovits' work in elucidating the meaning of these three terms describing

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[4]John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, (New York : Doubleday, 1991), 237-238.

[5]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 127-28.

[6]Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 240.

[7]Luke 13, 28-29; Matthew 11,11.

[8]Meier, *A Marginal Jew,* 240.

God and God's rule. [9] Both Brackley and Berkovits use several passages from the Old Testament to describe God's reign. God is revealed in the Old Testament traditions as a liberator king.[10]

***Sedeq, mishpat, sedaqah***

*Sedeq* is the "central concept governing all relationships." Brackley would say that it denotes justice for the oppressed. *Sedeq* can be equated with goodness in its totality or its highest form. One has to note, however, that goodness is in terms of morality, not legality. It is also translated as having the right relations and fulfilling what social relationships require.[11] Berkovits points out many other ways in which *sedeq* might be understood and even suggests looking at Isaiah 58: 6-8 and Isaiah 42:6-7. When one looks at the passages, one notes that carrying out *sedeq* is associated with the work of the Messiah. "*Sedeq* would then be all that 'the fast' requires: the crushing of the power of evil, the liberation of the captives, the shattering of all yokes that oppress men, the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the naked, and the housing of the poor."[12] It speaks of justice, in the broadest sense, for the poor and oppressed.

*Mishpat* and *sedaqah/s'daqah* are values subsumed under *sedeq*. *Mishpat* and *sedaqah* also have to do with the right relations and the obligations of these relationships. "*Mishpat* is a manifestation of *sedeq*." *Mishpat* assumes a contract between two parties where claims must be balanced.[13] *S'daqah* is a particular way of doing *sedeq* "without paying attention to the

[9]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*,132 and Eliezer Berkovits, *Man and God: studies in Biblical Theology* (Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1969), 322-6.

[10]Ex 34, 6-7; Ps 33, 4-5; Ps85, 10; Ps 89, 14; Hosea 2, 21-22; Is 46:13; Is 42, 6-7.

[11]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 129.

[12]Berkovits, *Man and God*, 324 and 331; Isaiah 42:6-7.

[13]Berkovits, *Man and God*, 331-332.

balancing of one's own claim against the claim of the other party."[14]

There are nuances that can be explored, but the core meaning of these words can be deciphered from how they appear together in Scriptures. These words appear always to speak about "the vindication of the victim, the liberation of the oppressed."[15] Berkovits holds that "*Hesed* is love or loving-kindness; *emeth* is sureness, steadfastness, reliability, enduring strength, lasting faithfulness. *Hesed ve'emeth* would then be lovingkindness that reliable and even may be irrevocable."[16] The latter pair of words qualify the intensity and manner of God's *sedeq*, *mishpat*, and *sedaqah*. When God manifests His justice and righteousness, it indicates his steadfast loving-kindness for the poor and oppressed.

Unlike Berkovits, Brackley does not dwell on the nuances of the abovementioned attributes of God. Rather, he points out their core meaning involving social relations. In the passages where these words occur, we can see how God is concerned with social relations and the institutions that embody them such that these are also attributed to the task of the Messiah and the moral obligations of those who claim to follow God.[17] What is demanded of Israel also reflects God's characteristics. This is a distinctive characteristic of the God of Israel – he is the redeemer and vindicator of the poor. What may seem like a social obligation is also revealed to be religious. Thus, liberation of the poor and oppressed is constitutive of God's reign.[18]

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Brackley, *Divine Revolution,* 130; Psalm 89:15 "*Sedeq* and *mishpat* are the foundation of your throne;" Psalm 99:4 "A powerful king who loves *mishpat* ... you execute *mishpat* and *sedaqah* in Jacob".

[16]Berkovits, *Man and God,* 287-288.

[17]Psalm 40: 10-11.

[18]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 130.

## Blessed are the Poor

If Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God was good news, to whom was it good news? Identifying the addressee helps us understand the meaning of the proclamation. Jesus was aware that his mission entails proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom to poor people.[19] Sobrino asserts that God's Reign is rightfully for poor people, especially when looking at God's interventions in the Old Testament.[20] The concreteness of poverty and oppression was something God responded to with *sedeq*. Thus, in Jesus' proclamation of God's Reign, we must also be clear with our understanding of who the poor were during Jesus' time.

Brackley notes how Jesus was well-aware of the material poverty in Galilee and how Palestinian standards considered the masses poor.[21] According to Meier, around 90% of the population may have qualified as 'poor.'[22] John Dominic Crossan notes how the Roman Empire was an agrarian society. This automatically entails "marked social inequality" evidenced in gaps in privilege, honor, wealth, and power.[23]

Another aspect of poverty highlighted by Brackley is its ability to underscore social relations. More than the absence of material goods, it also points to social relations where they are considered oppressed, inferior, or held in contempt.[24] "While

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[19]Luke 4:18, 7:22, Matt 11:5, Luke 6:20.

[20]Sobrino, *Jesus Christ the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Great Briatin: Burns and Oates, 1994), 79-80.

[21]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 131.

[22]Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1048 n2:

[23]John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 45-46.

[24]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 132.

*ptōchos* in ancient pagan Greek had solely a socioeconomic sense, the Hebrew adjective *'ānî* carried a double sense. ... The socioeconomic status designated by 'ānî involved not simply the lack of money or possessions, but first of all powerlessness and vulnerability vis-a-vis the powerful members of society."[25] Here, poverty must be understood as a socioeconomic and political reality. Brackley would even highlight how this understanding of poverty and marginalization seeped into the religious sphere.

Jesus understood that the observance of the Torah was not meant to demarcate between the righteous and the sinners. The observance of ritual purity had social implications since the sinner also became an outcast in Israeli society. This would be exacerbated by the overemphasis on ritual observance, which overshadowed the obligation to help one's fellow human being.[26] Brackley notes that God's Kingdom is also conceivable as a community with no outcasts. When Jesus focused on the outcasts of his time, it was also "an attack on self-exaltation and status-stratification," which led to this marginalization of people.[27]

God's reign brings in new social relations, forming a new community. If God's reign is fulfilled, it is not just about the emergence of material blessings as is often depicted by the Psalms or the prophets but also renewed relations. "God comes as king to do *mishpat* and *sedaqah* and to establish *sedeq* and *shalom*."[28] This meant renewed relations with those marginal-

[25]Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 384 n157

[26]Brackley, *Divine Revolution,* 134-135.

[27]Ibid., 135.You may also refer to these passages: Mark 10, 14-15 (Jesus on children); Luke 14, 7-11 (taking seats of honor); Matthew 23, 5-12 and Mark 9, 35.

[28]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 132.

ized.[29] This preferential option for the poor and marginalized indicates what God desires. He opts for the victims of injustice and poverty because He abhors injustice and poverty. Thus, God calls on His followers to also take on this stance.[30]

## The Response: Faith and Community

God's intervention always calls for a human response. Many of the Kingdom parables indicate how God calls for collaborators. Jesus' table fellowship indicated the fusion of God's initiative and human response.[31] Brackley notes that the response came in different forms – love, speaking truth to power, healing, and gathering outcasts. However, the most fundamental response had to be faith, distinguishing his disciples from those who simply witnessed Jesus but did not change their lives or commitments.[32]

Brackley notes that "faith points to the transformation of persons' and communities' entire way of being in the world. ... It points to new human beings, a new creation."[33] Lohfink emphasizes the same point that the faith response to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom entailed a new way of being with others and in a community consistent with the values of the Kingdom as proclaimed and lived out by Christ and exemplified

[29]One may take a look at how Jesus addressed or spoke of particular groups of people in the following passages: Luke 4, 16-22; Luke 6, 20-26; Mt 11, 2-6; Matt 25, 31-46; Mark 2, 13-17; Matt 21, 28-32; Luke 7, 29-30; Luke 15; Luke 7, 11-17; Luke 21, 1-4; John 7, 53-8, 11; Luke 10; 29-37 (Samaritans); Matt 22, 1-10 and Mark 12, 1-12 (Gentiles).

[30]Ibid., 133.

[31]Check Luke 9, 62; Matthew 7, 13-14; Mark 7, 15; 10, 15.

[32]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 140.

[33]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 142.

by some of the early Christian communities.[34] This response inspired a common living that somehow lessened any want or poverty in the said communities. "There were no poor among them."[35]

## Here But Not Yet

One of the common issues related to the proclamation of the Kingdom is its time of fulfillment. Brackley notes that Jesus was well aware of how his ministry signaled the entry of God's reign, which provoked conflict with the anti-reign.[36] It is unclear, however, what exactly this entailed except for what has been revealed in the Gospels. Meier asserts that the following can be concluded from the sayings on the expectation of the Kingdom: God will come as King; we should pray and hope for it; it will bring about reversals of "poverty, sorrow, and hunger;" it would include the gentiles, and Jesus would also experience this reversal even with his looming death. He even adds that Jesus thought the Kingdom would come soon, given the radical choices he and his disciples had to make. One senses urgency in the sayings and parables while there is a kind of continuity with John the Baptist's proclamations.[37] Meier provides a lengthy treatment of various scriptural texts and how they are to be interpreted, considering the passages' eschatological expectations and probable setting. Regardless of the exact time, "Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the

[34]Norbert Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Duane L. Christensen (Berkeley, CA : Bibal Press, 1987), 56.

[35]Acts 4:34.

[36]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 136.

[37]Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 337-8.

kingdom of God as the motivating force for radical conversion in the present moment, for any moment might be too late."[38]

Another concern that Brackley brings up in the understanding of the proclamation of God's Kingdom is the dichotomy between matter and spirit, especially in understanding the resurrection. For Jesus, God's Kingdom is not a city of disembodied spirits. The belief, then, in the resurrection of the dead pertained not to souls only but to the whole person. Brackley notes that "the Gospels know of no anthropological dualism." Even when Paul noted the newness in Christ, he assumed this non-dualistic anthropology. The life that is being referred to in the newness or what will be saved (cf. Mark 8, 35) is the life of the whole person.[39] Thus, any understanding of salvation should work with this kind of anthropology. Yet, Brackley knew the dualisms informing Biblical interpretation. He knows the tendency of some Bible readers to deny that Christ's salvation encompasses the social and political dimension of human life. Thus, he labors to recover how we can better understand Jesus and His proclamation of the Kingdom of God.[40]

In the succeeding sections, we shall explore how Brackley uses the thought of contemporary theologians to develop this understanding of the relationship between salvation and social justice.

## Brackley on Rahner

Brackley asserts that the relationship between salvation and social justice is linked to the relationship between nature and grace, spirit to matter, and sociality of humanity. Thus, he explores the theologies developed by Rahner and Gustavo

[38]Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 342. For the discussion of Meier on the scriptural texts, one may take a look at pages 336-342 of his work.

[39]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 138.

[40]Ibid., 123.

Gutierrez.[41] We will examine how Brackley uses particular themes and ideas in Rahner's thought to build up his thesis. The themes that we will look at are the supernatural existential, the orders of creation and redemption, and his treatment of the sociopolitical life.

## The Reaction to Extrinsicism and the Supernatural Existential

After the Counter-Reformation, the theology of grace was marked by extrinsicism. Extrinsicism distinguished grace from concrete reality as if it were superfluous to human nature. This school of thought argued that grace was "wholly extrinsic to human nature." This led some to think that humanity has another end apart from the supernatural one with God. An opposing school of thought would emerge with the rise of the *nouvelle* theologians. The *nouvelle* theologians asserted that the human condition has an affinity to the divine life. They would debunk hypothetical states such as nature and static essences. "Concrete-existential, personalist, dynamic, historical and explicitly Christological categories would characterize any attempt to explain God's relationship to humanity and creation in general."[42] This approach sought to be more world-affirming, reflecting an appreciation of the Incarnation and the intimacy of the divine with humanity.

Initially, Karl Rahner had been identified with the *nouvelle* theologians, but he distanced himself from them later. The reaction of the *nouvelle* theologians compromised the distinctions between nature and grace. However, Rahner struck a

[41]Ibid., 45.

[42]Ibid., 46.

middle ground with the "supernatural existential" which held that grace and nature are distinct from each other.[43]

The supernatural existential is more than just an affinity to grace. "God's universal saving will creates all human beings with an infinite emptiness or longing – which only God can satisfy – precisely in order to communicate divine life to them." It is better to call it an "ontological alert," a divine help freely given that becomes constitutive of humanity's existence. For Rahner, this affinity could not be something extrinsic to humanity.[44] Duffy explains this idea of Rahner in this manner: "[b]ecause the Creator gives humanity a supernatural end (and this end is primary in the divine intention), human being (and its world) is by that very fact inwardly and structurally other than it would have been had it not been so finalized."[45]

The supernatural existential is a marking of the human condition. It continues to influence the human person even if a rejection of grace has happened or the person is in a state of sin.[46] What influence does it exert? Brackley asserts that this existential's transcendental and supernatural character provides the goal and the condition of the possibility for humans to progress in "freedom, love, and knowledge." That is why Brackley appeals to this idea of Rahner. Salvation, when accepted, encompasses every aspect of human existence, including the social and the political.[47]

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[43]Stephen Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: nature and grace in modern Catholic thought* (Collegeville, MN : Liturgical Press, 1992), 85.

[44]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 48.

[45]Duffy, *The Graced Horizon*, 88.

[46]Karl Rahhner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary* (London : Burns and Oates,1983), 161.

[47]Brackley, *Divine Revolution,* 48-49.

## The Orders of Creation & Redemption: Embodiment, Historicity, & Sociality

Another insight of Rahner that Brackley draws from is the relationship between the order of creation and the order of redemption. This is a different set of ideas compared to Nature and Grace that Rahner explores. Rahner cautions against equating the order of redemption with grace and the order of creation with nature. Unlike Grace and Nature, which are distinguishable from each other, the orders of redemption and creation are not as clearly distinguishable. Thus, one cannot say that the two pairs are equivalents of each other.[48] Nevertheless, this discussion helps push forward Brackley's agenda.[49]

"We speak of the order of redemption within the order of creation."[50] The two orders are "materially co-extensive," and they interpenetrate.[51] This understanding has consequences for Rahner's anthropology, especially as he elaborates on embodiment, sociality, human history, and eschatology. It also relates to Rahner's understanding of human response or action to the world. Rahner suggests that the unifying principle of these two orders is that they are the focus of God's creative power and desire to share the divine life.[52] The two orders are not two totally distinct realities. What God created, God also wants to redeem. "The redemptive order must develop within the created order. ... The created order remains included within the redemptive order in so far as it is a distinct, necessary factory within the redemptive order."[53]

[48]Karl Rahner, *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, trans. Cecily Hastings (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 40.

[49]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 47.

[50]Rahner, *The Christian Commitment*, 38.

[51]Ibid., 52.

[52]Ibid., 52-53.

[53]Ibid.

Since the redemptive order develops from the created order, Rahner says that unity is something that will "be historically fulfilled, is already eschatologically complete, and yet is to be realized through human beings." [54] Thus, he makes an equivalence between salvation history and the history of this unity. The Christ event serves as the eschatological stage of the history of the unity. The whole Christ event culminating in the Paschal Mystery reveals God's final decision: the natural is "saved, glorified and to be given beatitude through the victory of grace."[55] One notes that as Rahner maintains the primacy and initiative of God's grace, he also leaves room to incorporate the human response that is being fulfilled in history.

Since Rahner asserts that this unfolding happens in history and embraces the whole of created reality, he also affirms how the human spirit is deeply tied to the human body. "Man cannot fulfill his spiritual nor indeed his supernatural life without embodying this fulfillment in material reality." This unity and interdependence correspond to God's will.[56] Brackley even notes that for the human spirit to be spirit, it needs a body. The body is the actualization of the human spirit. He notes that what we consider the more "spiritual" aspects of ourselves correspond to something "material," suggesting that they are dimensions of humans as embodied spirits. Brackley works along this line of thought with Rahner, especially in the former's emphasis on the sociality of human beings. Because the human spirit is linked to its body, the human spirit's expression necessarily happens in a material "public" space within history. Brackley would highlight that "for Rahner, one could never presume to limit the saving action of grace to some interior sphere clearly

[54]Ibid., 53.

[55]Ibid., 54-55.

[56]Ibid., 46-47.

demarcated from the external world."[57] Brackley affirms what McCool would say of Rahner's thought on the human spirit and historicity, namely, that a person "goes up towards God only by going out into the world."[58] Brackley then notes Rahner's response to the critique of his student Johann Baptist Metz. Metz claims that Rahner's theology does not open itself up to socio-political life.[59] Rahner himself responds to the criticism and shows that his work on transcendental theology can serve as a foundation for political theology.[60]

How Rahner's transcendental theology opens up to a political theology can be seen in his thought involving transcendence, intersubjectivity, and human sociality. As explored by Rahner, the link between transcendence and intersubjectivity is an important concept that Brackley uses to assert a theological anthropology highlighting humans as social beings. For Rahner, transcendence happens when the spirit moves "toward history, toward the fulfillment of freedom, toward fellow men and women." Thus, intersubjectivity is very much linked to transcendence since the world towards which one transcends is a world filled with people.[61] In another instance, Rahner asserts that the "actualization of human transcendence" takes

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[57]Brackley, *The Divine Revolution*, 50.

[58]Gerard McCool, *A Rahner Reader* (New York : Seabury Press, 1975), 56 quoted in Brackley, *The Divine Revolution,* 51.

[59]Brackley, *The Divine Revolution*, 53.

[60]: "[E]very concrete mystagogy must obviously from the very beginning consider the societal situation and the Christian praxis to which it addresses itself. ... For it has always been clear in my theology that a 'transcendental experience' (of God and of grace) is always mediated through a categorical experience in history, in interpersonal relations, and in society," (Karl Rahner, Introduction to *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy according to Karl Rahner* by James J. Bacik (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), quoted in *Divine Revolution* by Dean Brackley).

[61]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 53.

place "in the concrete and practical knowledge and freedom of 'everyday life,' and this is what is meant by interpersonal relationships."[62]

Human relationality is integral to human nature. The sociality of human beings is not just one of its many dimensions. For Rahner, it is at the heart of humanity, for it is through such relations that humanity transcends toward God. Thus, he relates it to the unity of the two love commandments. "The two dimensions of human love 'correspond to the two aspects of God's self-communication:' self-communication in the Spirit which justifies sinners and in the Logos who unifies history."[63]

When one puts all these ideas of Rahner together, one sees the social character of salvation. God's self-communication, which is salvific, happens in all areas and aspects of human existence. Brackley notes that "the social character of salvation transcends interpersonal intimacy to include social, cultural, economic and political life."[64] God's self-communication is "aimed at mankind as a unity, a unity which is always historically and socially constituted." Most of our biblical concepts affirm this interconnectedness.[65] Rahner connects grace to society and the whole of human history. For him, salvation history and human history are "co-existent and co-extensive" just as the orders of creation and redemption are unified.[66]

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[62]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith : an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 456.

[63]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 54.

[64]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 55.

[65]Karl Rahner, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society", trans. David Bourke, vol. 12 of *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, c1961-1979), 238 quoted in Brackley, *Divine Revolution,* 54.

[66]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 153.

## Brackley's Assessment of Rahner

Rahner's theology emerges from a tradition of reflections on nature and grace that is rarely concerned about social relations. His theology is ambiguous in explaining how grace operates in society. The theology that Rahner expounds makes it possible for us to understand the social meaning of God's activity. Brackley summarizes this when he says:

[b]ecause God grounds human transcendence and because finite spirit realizes itself via interaction with the world in all its material, interpersonal, and institutional complexity, salvation encompasses human reality as a whole – material and spiritual, personal, social, political, economic, and cultural – and includes acts of love and the justice and peace they produce, even when salvation in this sense is manifested partially, ambiguously, and in fragile form.[67]

Another observation that Brackley picks up from Rahner is that when human acts are inspired by grace, they can be salvific. Rahner appreciates the fusion of the divine initiative and the human response and how this plays out in the unfolding of the reign of God in history. Brackley refers to these as blessings of salvation, which can be understood in three senses: "first as justification and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the church and the individual; second, moral acts (ultimately acts of love); and third, the fruits of such action." The manifestation of the first sense is found in the second and third senses. These produce blessings that bring about "community, justice, peace, food and drink shared."[68]

Brackley's third observation is that Rahner optimally appraises the individual as his starting point for theological

[67]Brackley, *Divine Revolution,* 61-62.

[68]Ibid., 52.

anthropology. For Brackley, Rahner fails to consider how there is suffering and social sin and how God's salvific actions relate to these two realities. Brackley even cites Moltmann's criticism of such optimistic theologies, which tend "to understate suffering and the power of sin." While it presents God's grace as present and abounding in the world, Rahner's first-world theology neglects how sin and suffering abound and are also incarnate in relations and structures in society. Brackley suspects that Rahner does not account for how grace relates to social relations and institutions since he only relates it directly to persons. While God's self-communication reveals a way of being together and thus can serve as a starting point for locating grace in social relations, Brackley feels that this yields only a partial link. A more comprehensive account can be provided by a political theology that can spell out how grace operates on the level of social institutions.[69]

## Brackley on Gustavo Gutierrez

When Church communities in Latin America reflected on their faith from the perspective of the victims of injustice, liberation theology emerged. One of its important pillars is the Dominican theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. His seminal work, *The Theology of Liberation*, answers this question: "What relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation?"[70]

Gutierrez is cognizant of the grace debates and agrees with and uses Rahner's thought. He affirms that one cannot clearly "indicate the boundaries between grace and human nature."[71]

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[69]Ibid., 63.

[70]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 29.

[71]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 70.

Gutierrez, however, affirms the "independence" of the secular world and does not want to espouse an old Christendom model where the Church is the only means of salvation and that she needs to intervene directly in political affairs in the world for the interest of the Church.[72] Gutierrez's non-ecclesiocentric move affirms that the offer of salvation is available to those outside the Church.[73] This leads Gutierrez to hold that the criterion for salvation cuts across religions and occurs within the Church and human history. Furthermore, the context of misery and oppression he witnessed in Latin America grounds his exploration of how liberation is related to salvation.[74]

## The Three Approaches of Liberation

Gutierrez examines the relationship between salvation and liberation while identifying three levels of liberation. There are three distinct levels of meaning, but all are interpenetrating: "political liberation, human liberation throughout history, liberation from sin and admission to communion with God."[75] For this present study, first, we will explore briefly what these three levels are, and then later, we will explore how these relate to the question of salvation, Christ's work, and the Church's mission.

The first approach of liberation reveals how development is a political problem, and poverty is seen as "a function of oppression." Brackley notes how Gutierrez understands and interprets his time's economic and political realities betrays

[72]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 34-5.

[73]Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Churc (Lumen Gentium)*, 21 November 1964, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[74]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 83 and 24.

[75]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 72.

his links to dependency theory and Marxism. This level underscores the necessity of institutional transformation and political liberation.[76] At this level, liberation is understood as the people's collective desire to be freed from economic, political, and social oppression. It assumes a conflictual stance in understanding society where there are oppressors and the oppressed. Gutierrez takes such a stance when he argues that some countries develop at the expense of others, especially those with a history of colonization.[77] This notion of liberation clearly articulates what one should be freed from but not what one should be freed for.

The second approach to liberation elaborates on the historical self-realization of humanity. Here, the goal of liberation is human fulfillment. Gutierrez describes it as "assuming conscious responsibility for [humanity's] own destiny."[78] Structural change is just part of humanity's self-realization. Brackley notes how Gutierrez uses Hegel and Marx in understanding the development of human consciousness, freedom, and social coexistence as history unfolds. Gutierrez also emphasizes personal and material transformation as integral to this development process. Furthermore, this development accounts for humanity's interaction with nature.[79]

Brackley and Gutierrez emphasize that any liberation necessarily involves transforming the whole human person, including human relations. In other words, the transformation of humanity should lead to the change of social relations, even with nature.[80] However, one may ask: What does this trans-

[76]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 73.

[77]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 24 and 51.

[78] Ibid, 25.

[79]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 74

[80]Ibid, 75.

formation look like? Although Gutierrez steers away from ideological fundamentalism, he appropriates how Christian charity can operate when class or power struggle is evident. He suggests that the Christian should acknowledge this reality formed by oppressors and oppressed and love in such a way that both oppressor and oppressed are liberated from their inhuman conditions. This provides a nuanced understanding of the preferential love for the poor, often focused only on the oppressed and marginalized. Gutierrez goes on to say that in our choosing to love and liberate the oppressed, we also seek to liberate the oppressors from the inhumanity that binds them as oppressors.[81] One is then led to ask: how is this love lived out? What is the norm for this process of liberation? This leads to the third approach offered by Gutierrez.

The third level that Gutierrez proposes is also the goal of the entire liberation process – salvation which is "the gift of complete communion with God and other human beings."[82] This level acknowledges how sin blocks communion and how Jesus Christ saves us by freeing us from sin for communion with God and others. Here, Gutierrez explores God's liberating and salvific work in history as well as the sociality of the human person. Doing so allows him to theologize on social sin.[83]

These interdependent approaches are "three levels of meaning of a single, complex process, which finds its deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ."[84] How, then, do these play out in human history? Gutierrez employs Rahner's idea of the unity of history and tackles it from a Christological perspective. When Christ assumed our

[81]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 274-276.

[82]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 76.

[83]Ibid, 76-77.

[84]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 26.

humanity, the history of salvation then became part of our own history, which already includes the history of our fulfillment and becoming.[85] Brackley notes that "Gutierrez's argument boils down to this: The goal of the liberation process is human fulfillment. A sound theology of grace recognizes only one human destiny. Therefore, communion with God and others – salvation – is occurring in the liberation process."[86]

## Human Historicity and Sociality: Sin and Salvation

For Gutierrez, the goal of salvation is communion with God and with others. If this is the case, then humans are inherently social beings. This is presupposed even in the threefold liberation approach.[87] Theology has to deal with this communitarian aspect of the human person to break out of its individualistic tendency.[88] Thus, Gutierrez elaborates on a theology for social and structural sin, how salvation manifests, and the role Christ plays.

Sin impedes human development. Sinfulness makes enslavement and oppression present in history. Sin manifests itself in situations of injustice and alienation in the same manner that salvation also occurs with such historicity.[89] Gutierrez elaborates that "sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons." Sin ruptures our communion with God and others. This appeal to sin is not some form of spiritualism but is an acknowledgment of what motivates humans who engage in

[85]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 86.

[86]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 77.

[87]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 45.

[88]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 77.

[89]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 102-3.

structures and practices of oppression.[90] Sin occurs within a concrete historical context, which produces situations where there are "unjust structures and social systems." Thus, for Gutierrez, salvation is about more than being liberated from sin. It also entails being liberated from the oppression and injustice that it perpetuates.[91] This understanding of sin and salvation is reflected in Church teaching.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,* John Paul II takes up social and structural sin.

> If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not out of place to speak of 'structures of sin,' which, ..., are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior. ... However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us.[92]

He identified it as the root of evil, like how Gutierrez characterizes sin as the "fundamental alienation" breeding abuses of power, poverty, and the continued exploitation of humans and the rest of creation.[93]

Working with this logic, Gutierrez emphasizes how salvation takes on a historical and social character but is not necessarily reducible to such aspects. This paradigm is best captured in the Old Testament by the Exodus story. Gutierrez notes that

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[90]Ibid., 103.

[91]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 80.

[92]John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30 December 1987, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html, no.36.

[93]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 103.

the Exodus depicts how salvation frees a people from a sinful and oppressive situation so they may be free for "covenanted communion with God and others." This revealed to the Israelites who God was and what He did.[94] However, Gutierrez elaborates and deepens this when he speaks of Christ and His saving work.

Jesus' Incarnation is a key element in how Gutierrez elaborates salvation's historical, social, and political character. Embodiment, history, and sociality are part of salvation history. A disembodied, purely spiritual view of salvation betrays a particular non-scriptural dichotomy between "matter and spirit and a failure to understand biblical eschatology."[95] Thus, the whole human being as an embodied spirit in history in relation to others is saved. Gutierrez uses the Chalcedonian principle, which "affirms the distinction without separation of Christ's divinity and his humanity."[96] Thus, the historical, material, and relational aspects of humanity are embraced by Christ's salvific work.

Gutierrez pushes his thought further: how does Christ's salvific work continue within history and how does it relate to the growth of the Kingdom? Gutierrez points out that there are partial fulfillments of God's promise even after the Christ event, yet Christ's Spirit drives and inspires such events, which also point to God's action at the end of time.[97] Thus, any temporal progress or liberating historical event becomes part of salvation history, no matter what the scale. The liberating historical events, while they participate in God's work and manifest the growth of the Kingdom, cannot be equated and

[94]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 79.

[95]Ibid., 82.

[96]Ibid., 83.

[97]Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 95.

fully identified with the fullness of God's Kingdom. This shows how Gutierrez's thought is not reductionist.[98]

In another work, Gutierrez explains that while we often emphasize the eschatological aspect of the Kingdom of God, which "gives history its final meaning," it is incorrect to infer that everything will happen at the end of time as though our current reality were devoid of any activity related to the Kingdom. He makes this important note because this nuance allows the ethical dimension of the Kingdom to surface. The Christian who accedes to the demands of the Kingdom must live these out within one's immediate historical context. Gutierrez asserts it in this manner:

> "[A]ccepting the Kingdom of God means refusing to accept a world that instigates or tolerates the premature and unjust deaths of the poor. It means rejecting the hypocrisy of a society that claims to be democratic but violates the most elementary rights of the poor."[99]

## Brackley's Appraisal of Gutierrez

Brackley notes that most criticisms against liberation theology do not apply to Gutierrez. While maintaining the transcendence of God's reign, Brackley emphasizes how Gutierrez relates God's reign to concrete historical realities, including sin, conflict, and injustice.[100] Gutierrez's theology, then, serves to correct what Western theology leaves out.[101] Equally important is that Gutierrez's theology builds a theological anthropology emphasizing how humans are inherently social beings

[98]Ibid., 104.

[99]Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. Connell (London: SCM, 1991), 102-103.

[100] Thomas Louis Schubeck, "Divine Revolution: Salvation and Liberation in Catholic Thought," *Theological Studies* 58, no. 2 (June 1997): 395–96.

[101]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 90.

and how politics is an important element in human life. In line with this, Gutierrez emphasizes the role of politics, but he does not reduce the Gospel or the salvific act to it.[102]

One criticism that Brackley raises against Gutierrez's theology is its problematic account of the relationship between divine initiative and human response. Gutierrez notes that human work for justice is necessary to establish the Reign of God, and without such work, God's reign cannot grow. Brackley observes that this Pelagian tendency in Gutierrez's writings are from a time in his life marked with much activism. The "later Gutierrez" would move into a more contemplative stance and begin writing about a spirituality of liberation. His thought and works later paved the way for the role of spirituality in deepening his theology. Brackley notes that Gutierrez eventually highlights the importance of an encounter with God that motivates a genuine and disinterested love of neighbor. Brackley would say that "[f]aith does not add to reason in social analysis, much less substitute for it, but it illuminates social analysis; it steers it." It grounds one's engagement in the fact that the Christian is simply participating in God's work.[103]

## Elements of Brackley's Framework for Christian Social Involvement

At this point, the scriptural and theological foundations of Brackley's framework of social involvement have already been presented. The basic elements of his framework will be presented as they are culled from his various writings.

Brackley notes three poles of experience through which we encounter the truth and reality.[104] These three poles are the world around us, our inner life, and the cultural word about

[102] Ibid., 86.

[103] Ibid., 89.

[104] Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 160.

the world. We need to note that Brackley does not usurp the pastoral cycle as a tool for social engagement, but his framework can supplement the pastoral cycle. He focuses on certain epistemological, scriptural, theological, and spiritual themes that provide a way of proceeding with regard to social involvement.[105]

## Entering the World of the Poor

Together with moral theologians Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, Brackley draws inspiration from liberation theology, which made the perspective of the poor and their experience a privileged starting point for theologizing and discernment of action.[106] Brackley points out that most theology emerges from a context alien to the experience and the world of poor people. Unless appropriated, most theology would not reflect the experience of the masses. Brackley speaks of "anthropological, cosmological and moral myths" that frame our scope of knowing, yet most of them are a function of our personal history, socioeconomic status, educational background, and other factors.[107]

Regular encounters with the poor and marginalized can broaden our horizons. Brackley cites how the students he accompanied changed because of the encounters with the poor of El Salvador and the relationship that they had formed with them. After those encounters, the students' own concerns and problems, which had preoccupied them, became peripheral relative to the concerns and problems they saw among

[105] Dean Brackley, "Searching for Truth and the Right Thing to Do," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 216.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Dean Brackley, "Theology and Solidarity: Learning from Sobrino's Method," *Hope & Solidarity*: *Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 5.

the poor people of El Salvador. They began to realize that the poor were just like them but were also different because of the injustices they suffered, which the students now recognized as cruel and inhumane. Yet, the students also witnessed how the people lived with so much hope and goodness despite their situation.[108]

The abovementioned process illustrates Brackley's description of conscientization, an important process in this element. One does not engage poor communities for its own sake. Brackley emphasizes the need to reflect on such encounters and note one's emotional reactions and thought processes that emerge from the encounters. He goes on to assert that conscientization asks us to face and articulate our prejudices, particularly "the 'original prejudice' that some people are important and others (most) don't count."[109] This process is a form of cognitive liberation. The use of reason transcends thought experiments, inferencing from statistics and theories, but involves actual experiences and praxis. If we reach this point, then we can answer the following questions about the situations of injustice we see: how did we get here? What keeps us from moving forward? Who benefits from the *status quo*? What enables this current situation?[110]

While entering the world of the poor allows us to experience what they experience and see things from their perspective, it is equally important to know what can be done or how we can move forward. That is why Brackley asserts the need for a

[108] Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 216-7.

[109] Ibid., 217.

[110] The questions I listed here are just elaborations of the initial questions proposed by Brackley in page 217 of the aforementioned article.

"utopian prophetic imagination."[111] Gustavo Gutierrez notices two complementary movements in this utopian prophetic mindset: denunciation and annunciation. One denounces an existing structure or reality because of the injustices present. Yet, the utopian imagination also announces an alternative reality grounded in values contrary to the values embodied in the reality being denounced.[112] For Brackley, the norm for the values of this utopian prophetic imagination is grounded in Jesus Christ and the Reign of God. Our social ethics and involvement should be patterned after Christ, who denounced the injustices of his time while announcing the arrival of the Kingdom. It is no wonder then that Brackley dubs the Reign of God as "the *summum bonum* of Christian social ethics."[113]

## Personal Transformation and Discipleship

Whenever Brackley promotes encounters, he refers to encounters with the marginalized and encounters with God, which may occur in one's encounter with the poor. Both types of encounters can transform us in a way that reshapes our values and perceptions. William Spohn writes, "[t]ransformation of the person down to her most important values, therefore, is necessary to correct the vision of the heart."[114] This transformation occurs in the life of a disciple.

In the Greek New Testament, one finds two words related to discipleship: μαθητής and ἀκολουθέω. [115] *Mathétés* (μαθητής) is

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[111]Ibid., 218

[112]Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 136.

[113]Brackley, "Christian Social Ethics – in Three Not-so-Easy Lessons," *New Catholic World*, vol. 226, Jan. 1983, 23.

[114]William Spohn, *Go and do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 86.

[115]BibleHub, Strong's Greek: 3101. μαθητής (*mathétés*) – a disciple, accessed 2 February 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/3101.htm.

usually translated into English as disciple. The second related Greek word is *akoloutheó* (ἀκολουθέω), which means "I follow."[116] Both Greek words referring to discipleship must be understood within the context of a teacher who is the *didaskalos*.[117] Common among the Jews, discipleship was heavily teacher-centered. Yet there were common features that all the Rabbis adhered to, except for Jesus. Rausch notes discontinuities in Jesus' brand of discipleship with the discipleship in the Jewish Rabbinic tradition. Unlike the Jewish rabbis of His time, Jesus invited his disciples. Jesus would call even the ritually impure (Mk 2:15, Luke 8:2). He called disciples to a radical reorientation. One had to "leave their past behind" (Mk 10:21; Lk 9:57-62). His disciples "shared in his ministry." This also meant sharing His commitment to service and love (Jn 15: 12-13).[118]

Gerhard Lohfink notes another important difference between the kind of discipleship espoused by Jesus *vis-à-vis* the rabbinic tradition. Rabbinic students studied the Torah, its precepts, and various interpretations, while Jesus' disciples were called not just to learn the Torah or know what it means to live out the Torah, but also to follow a person – Jesus Himself.[119] Discipleship in the mold of following a person has significant implications for the quality of commitment both as embodied by Jesus the teacher and as demanded by his disciples.

Such a commitment is something that Brackley identifies as necessary in one's social and ethical involvement. It provides

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[116]BibleHub, Strong's Greek: 190. ἀκολουθέω (*akoloutheó*) – to follow, accessed 2 February 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/3101.htm. Cf. Mark 1:18

[117]Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), 71.

[118]Ibid., 72-73.

[119]Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Diliman, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 201), 73-74.

head knowledge of principles and values to be used in one's decision-making. But such a commitment also entails a transformation that corrects one's perspective and shapes one's affectivity.[120] Brackley highlights the need to discern interior movements and one's vocation when one senses a desire to respond to the injustices and suffering that one witnesses in the world. Thus, bringing one's encounter with the marginalized to bear on one's encounter with God in prayer is expected to evoke a call and make one question one's values. One would then need to discern interior movements and eventually act and move toward the good one is called to do.[121]

For Brackley, this gradual character development culminates in the assimilation of the person of Jesus Christ. Following Christ, the disciple seeks to love in the way Jesus did. The disciple seeks to love the very people Jesus loved. He exercised solidarity and God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized. Thus, any faithful disciple of Christ ought also to exercise the same preferential option.[122] The hope is that the prophetic utopian imagination mentioned earlier is informed by a *sensus Christi*. For Brackley, this *sensus Christi* can be fostered when one is schooled in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is no wonder that Brackley integrates it into his framework. Thus, this prophetic imagination is deeply rooted not in some ideology but in God's self-revelation in Christ in Scriptures.[123]

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[120]Brackley, "Christian Social Ethics – in Three Not-so-Easy Lessons," 32.

[121]Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 220.

[122]Brackley, "Christian Social Ethics – in Three Not-so-Easy Lessons," 32.

[123]Ibid., 34.

Up to this point, one can see how Brackley's framework leans on experience, spirituality, scriptures, and theology. However, this is insufficient. Working from these elements alone risks operating on a relativistic framework. It lacks a reliable way by which the principles from these elements can be articulated and adapted to times and situations. This is where the need for a community arises. The third pole by which reality comes to us as the cultural word about the world is through a discerning community.[124]

## Community

Brackley is critical of how liberal individualism undermines commitment and our sense of solidarity. Its premium on freedom is often at the expense of realizing the need to identify and collaborate with other people, especially those outside our circles. It often equates autonomy with self-sufficiency.[125] This thinking rejects the relational nature of the human person. Brackley believes that personal autonomy is necessary for one's maturity, but such autonomy is about more than self-sufficiency.[126] This is essential in understanding Brackley's agenda of discovering what facilitates a commitment to solidarity with the poor and marginalized in our society.

Brackley identifies the Church as one wisdom-bearing community that helps members discover their vocation and the commitment it calls for. It provides and nourishes "an experience of transcendence and an alternative vision and praxis."[127] How so? She offers the Divine Revelation that has been handed to her and engages other communities and

[124]Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times,* 160.

[125]Ibid., 64-65.

[126]Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 220.

[127]Ibid., 221.

trends in history that have emerged so that she may appropriate, update, and clarify her teachings in light of different contexts.[128] Consequently, the Church dialogues with other communities and wisdom traditions. This process enriches her self-understanding and refines the principles she shares with her members to use in their discernment and engagement. Brackley calls this a "mutual corrective and deepening."[129] Brackley notes that the community he refers to can be any community.

One's commitment to one's vocation can be fostered by more particular communities like one's family, peer group, community organization, etc. Brackley asserts that community membership is necessary for one's maturation. "What needs stressing today is that, unless we identify critically and creatively with such a community, we flounder about, shaped as much by markets and mass media as anything else."[130]

Our communities help shape and form the values and inclinations that affect our decision-making. Consciously or unconsciously, it is through these communities that we learn what or who is important (and what or who is not important). Brackley reminds us that our communities, through their traditions, embody simultaneously prejudice and truth. Even the Church is not spared from this.[131] Brackley points out that a healthy community will always have room for dissent, self-criticism, and reform. Brackley, however, is aware that communities are imperfect. As time goes by, community traditions seek to preserve what is good, but they also accumulate negative

[128]Brackley, "Christian Social Ethics – in Three Not-so-Easy Lessons," 34-35.

[129]Ibid., 35.

[130]Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 221.

[131]Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times,* 167.

elements.[132] Nevertheless, owing to its prophetic tradition, the Church or any other group within it must engage in "self-critique and "purification". [133] Brackley believes this is possible through a process of dialogue with marginalized sectors in communities since they may raise valid concerns that are neglected by mainstream community members.[134] This is the process the Church is going through as it prepares for the Synod on Synodality. Several groups within the Church have deliberately been reaching out and listening to the concerns of marginalized sectors while discerning how these concerns are integral to the Church's own growth and fidelity to Her mission.[135]

Throughout his writings, Brackley always appeals to the influence of a community in an individual's life. Appreciating the significance of communities requires seeing them as more than a static collection of individuals. We can better understand and, perhaps, resolve a good number of our issues when we have this in mind. Brackley asserts that our society is better understood as a system where individual elements have some kind of autonomy yet manifest interdependence with various parts of the system. Within this intricately interconnected society, the necessary virtue to be espoused is solidarity as

[132]Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 220.

[133]David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 236-37. In Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do."

[134]Brackley, "Searching for the Truth and the Right Thing to Do," 221.

[135]Sarah MacDonald, "Synod Process Must Recognise the Marginalised Say Religious," *The Tablet* (February 2022), https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14956/synod-process-must-recognise-the-marginalised-say-religious.

a response to those who suffer.[136] This understanding should reshape our ethics. Such an ethics would emphasize

> (1) the objective requirements of the historical situation, (2) the institutional context of moral problems and the need to address their root causes, and (3) the need for "conscientization" in the formation of conscience.[137]

This is Brackley's reaction to a morality that is traditionally heteronomous. Brackley notes that traditional heteronomous ethics works with an external authority imposing norms regardless of context and may be oblivious to the needs on the ground.[138] In contrast, the kind of ethics that Brackley proposes is contextual and participatory. The commitment and engagement with marginalized communities make it possible for people to identify with their cause.[139] As it aims to recognize peoples' varying contexts and social systems, especially those living in the margins, it seeks not to relativize moral principles. Rather, it operationalizes the values of solidarity and subsidiarity into an ethical decision-making process. Such a process integrates Catholic moral principles, principles of Catholic Social Teaching, Scriptures, as well as structural analysis and appeals to cultural values.[140]

For Brackley, this stress on solidarity and community over liberal individualist claims can help us rally faster toward a society that can heal its wounds of inequality, violence, and injustice. It is a participatory ethos where we hope to

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[136]Brackley, "A Radical Ethos," *Horizons* 24, no. 1 (Spr 1997): 30-33.

[137]Ibid., 33.

[138]Ibid., 17.

[139]Ibid., 33.

[140]Brackley and Thomas Louis Schubeck, "Moral Theology in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (March 2002): 159-60.

accompany each other, especially with those who have been left behind.[141]

## Points of Discontinuity

Certainly, Brackley is not the only one who offers a framework for Christian social involvement. Several other frameworks are present within the Church, and each of them fits a particular spirituality, a certain set of assumptions for theological anthropology, and a different type of hermeneutic in reading the Scriptures. To better understand the framework of Brackley, we will explore in this section how two other frameworks differ from Brackley. The first one is the framework espoused by Jacques Maritian. The second framework is from liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo.

## Overcoming Extrinsicism in Jacques Maritain's Paradigm

Jacques Maritain was a French philosopher who lived from 1882-1973. He had a passion for social justice and was a known Thomist.[142] Brackley notes that for Maritain, the Renaissance and the Reformation brought about a glorification of humanity by distancing itself from divinity. Even if Maritain valued the technical and social progress humanity achieved during the 19th century, he identified anthropocentric humanism as a flaw of the Western World.[143] Because humanity sought to move forward in the world without God, Maritain believed there ought to be a "total recasting of our cultural and temporal structures," which gave rise to what he proposed as a New

[141]Ibid., 35.

[142]Gerald A McCool, "Jacques Maritain: A Neo-Thomist Classic," *The Journal of Religion* 58, No. 4 (Oct., 1978): 381.

[143]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 25.

Christendom. In his work entitled Integral Humanism, Maritain was convinced that Thomism could make this happen.[144]

One of the key theological presuppositions of Maritain is the clear distinction between the temporal and spiritual orders. The socio-political affairs of the world, material reality, and nature were part of the temporal order. The spiritual order included the human spirit, the virtues, and anything that aids in the participation of human life with the divine life. For Maritain, the two orders may be inseparable but are so distinct that they do not interpenetrate or overlap. "What is temporal cannot be eternal; the imperishable cannot perish."[145] Such a distinction would have consequences in understanding salvation, eschatology, and the relationship between culture and the person of Jesus Christ.[146]

Brackley raises one objection against Maritain in this regard: he does not entirely overcome extrinsicism, which distinguishes grace from concrete reality as if it were superfluous to human nature.[147] Maritain believes that "salvation remains extrinsic to the temporal good of the social order." The common good, which Maritain claims to be the end goal of the temporal order, is entirely distinct from salvation, which is the end goal of the spiritual order. This is because Maritain believes in two destinies for humanity – one that is temporal and the other spiritual – even if he debunks the idea of a purely human nature apart from grace.[148] This leads Brackley to his most crucial objections.

Maritain's Thomism is Aristotelian. Thus, there are clear lines of distinction between matter and spirit. Since it is

[144]Ibid., 25-26.

[145]Ibid., 27.

[146]Ibid., 28-31.

[147]Ibid., 45.

[148]Ibid., 32-33.

through the human spirit that we participate in the spiritual order, Maritain believes grace works mostly within the interior dimension of the human person. For Maritain, the realms of culture, society, and politics do not directly participate in the spiritual order since the temporal good is subordinate to the spiritual good.[149] Brackley strongly rejects the dissociation of the internal life from the external life, especially in the realms Maritain associates with the temporal order.[150]

Despite how Maritain advocates for social justice and the good that politics can achieve, Maritain espouses a kind of individualism since he believes that people are already constituted before any social interaction or engagement.[151] His understanding of the end times and the progress of the temporal order in history betrays this belief. For him, "individual persons, personal virtue, and the church endure in glory." Our struggle for justice and the building up of a more humane society is merely an effect of God's saving action and a means to prepare us for the "posthistorical reign of God." Maritain acknowledges that political and social elements can be enlightened when humanity possesses and exercises virtues, but he does not consider this as some sort of social salvation, nor does he link it to God's salvific work.[152] Maritain asserts this disjunction: "[t]here is no continuity between the social good, as such, in history and the city of the blessed."[153]

At this point, we recall the assertions related to theological anthropology that Brackley presented earlier. His adherence to Rahner's transcendental theology marks a clear break with

[149]Ibid., 28-29.

[150]Ibid., 34.

[151]Ibid., 41.

[152]Ibid., 36.

[153]Ibid., 39.

the extrinsicism that Maritain did not overcome.[154] Brackley's appeal to other philosophers and anthropologists leads him to believe that human beings constitute themselves in societal interactions. Thus, sociality is an inherent part of human nature. [155] This also means that such social relations are governed by what Rahner would call the order of redemption. Consequently, what Maritain speculates will be excluded from glorification Brackley insists will be integrated.[156]

Brackley asserts that the relationship between salvation and social justice are linked to the relationship between nature and grace, spirit, and matter, sociality and humanity. In the next section, we shall explore how Brackley deviates from a strand of liberation theology that is secularizing and reductionist.[157]

## Veering Away from a Secularizing Hermeneutic

Andrew Prevot believes that Brackley's framework and account of liberation theology, and his use of the Spiritual Exercises are comparable with what other Jesuits do in the same field. Prevot compares Brackley's work with Juan Luis Segundo, Ignacio Ellacuria, and Segundo Galilea, who are known liberation theologians and spiritual writers. Each of them has written their own commentary on the Exercises and has made significant contributions to liberation theology. Comparing Brackley to these other Jesuits, Prevot notes an

[154]Ibid., 61.

[155]Ibid., 100-109. These pages also include the survey of various philosophers and anthropologists that tackle the sociality of human beings.

[156]Ibid., 57-9.

[157]Andrew L. Prevot, "Ignatian Spirituality, Political Effectiveness, and Spiritual Discernment: Dean Brackley's Account of Liberation Theology," *Political Theology* 18, no. 4 (June 2017): 310.

interesting divergence between Brackley and Segundo's work. For Prevot, Brackley "does not adopt Segundo's secularizing hermeneutic."[158]

What does Prevot mean by a "secularizing hermeneutic"? Prevot recognizes that many, if not all, Catholic theologians use philosophical frameworks in building up their thought. A plurality of such frameworks have likewise been integrated into developing Church doctrines. However, Prevot notes that some Catholic theologians cannot resist the "secularizing pull" of such frameworks, especially in the practice of critical theology.[159]

In the case of Juan Luis Segundo, Prevot identifies that he uses Marx's philosophical framework in his writings and falls into the trap of diminishing theology. Segundo does employ a Marxist philosophical method to determine what can and cannot be salvaged from Christianity, and the results are quite theologically meagre: only Jesus's humanity, not his divinity, and only certain aspects of this humanity that seem conducive to historical projects of liberation can be rescued on such Marxist grounds.[160]

Prevot observes that Segundo's manner of using a critical philosophy like that of Marx is incompatible with Catholic liberation theology. In fact, Prevot cites several other liberation theologians who use Marx's critical framework but remain consistent with the articles of faith, communal ethics, and the value of Christian worship. There is even one who integrates Marx's framework into a Christian critique of capitalism and,

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[158]Ibid.

[159]Prevot, "The Use of Philosophy in Critical Catholic Theology," *The Catholic Reception of Continental Philosophy in North America*, eds. Gregory P. Floyd and Stephanie Rumpza (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 183-184.

[160]Ibid., 184.

ironically, "Soviet-style communism." Another theologian who uses a Marxist framework is the Dominican Gustavo Gutierrez. Prevot notes that Gutierrez diverges from the path set out by Marx that ends up secularizing theology.[161] Interestingly, Brackley uses the liberation framework of Gustavo Gutierrez and integrates it into his own framework.

As presented earlier, Brackley supplements Rahner's transcendental theology with the liberation paradigm of Gutierrez. Gutierrez highlighted the social nature of humans and thereby challenged theology to be less individualistic and to recover for the Christian that sense of being called into a community, as noted in Scriptures.[162] "He does not collapse transcendence into creation." Gutierrez emphasizes the role of politics, but he does not reduce the Gospel or the salvific act to politics.[163] By adopting the paradigm of Gutierrez in his framework, Brackley severs himself from a strand of liberation theology that earned the censorship of the Church who continues to be wary of such a theology.[164]

According to Prevot, Brackley's approach is able to respond to the criticisms and concerns raised against liberation theology, whether these come from the Church itself or from camps that believe only in secular politics of involvement. Brackley's use of Ignatian spirituality allows for a richer appropriation of theology to inform one's discernment for socio-political engagement. Comparing Brackley's approach to secular approaches and other types of liberation theology, Prevot observes that

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[161]Ibid., 184-185.

[162]Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 77.

[163]Ibid., 86.

[164]Ole Jakob Løland, "The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology," *International Journal of Latin American Religions* no. 5 (2021): 303-304.

[T]he spirituality-based model of liberation theology that Brackley advocates is not only similarly effective; it also bears certain practical benefits that are largely lacking in secular and other less robustly spiritual alternatives.[165]

At the same time, Prevot is convinced that Brackley's approach provides something that is politically effective. This means it allows individuals and communities who use the framework to come together, pray, discern, engage the world, and work against unjust structures and practices. Brackley's import of Ignatian spirituality sets him apart from proponents of a secular approach or even those from a traditional liberation theology mindset. His appropriation of Ignatian spirituality colors the lens of the social analysis he employs, informs his theology, and shapes his discerned course of action.[166]

## Conclusion: A Politically Effective Christian Framework

It would be good to unpack what Prevot means that Brackley's account of liberation theology found in *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* is politically effective and then apply this to Brackley's other writings.[167]

Judging political effectiveness of a framework for social action implies identifying "what political ideas and actions are most effective at bringing about liberation."[168] Among these elements are institutions, structures, processes, laws, protocols, and policies in society. But on top of these, an essential element to consider are the agents. Thus, Prevot believes that virtues, character formation, and the formation of a harmonious community are also components of political effective-

[165]Ibid., 311.

[166]Prevot, "Ignatian Spirituality, Political Effectiveness, and Spiritual Discernment," 310.

[167]Ibid., 316.

[168]Ibid., 313.

ness.[169] Brackley's unique contribution is his integration of Ignatian spirituality. While spirituality, or any theology for that matter, is not required for a framework for socio-political engagement, Prevot recognizes that integrating spirituality and theology enriches such a framework and offers alternatives, especially for formation that would not be available in a secular framework.[170]

Brackley's emphasis on encounters and forming relationships with the communities of poor and marginalized people promotes arriving at grounded and level-headed judgments for social engagement. Such encounters allow for an interior knowledge of systems, relations, and peoples on the ground. Stories of his own encounters always enrich Brackley's presentation of social research.[171] Thus, one's sociological, political, and theological knowledge must not remain theoretical and speculative. Instead, it must flow into one's decisions and actions and inform and enrich one's social analysis and theological reflection.[172] Such commitment and praxis will then have the potential for political effectiveness.

The spiritual import of Brackley does not dampen his practical and political thinking. The framework involving discernment allows one to enter into dialogue with other sources of knowledge and makes the entire process interdisciplinary. Brackley's framework draws from revelation, scriptures, and theology and integrates the works of economists, sociologists,

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[169]Ibid., 314.

170Ibid., 315.

[171]Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 254-5. See Brackley, Devastation, Faith, and Resilience and Beyond Elections in El Salvador.

[172]Brackley, "Theology and Solidarity: Learning from Sobrino's Method," 9.

philosophers, and scientists.[173] Yet, his use of theology and Ignatian spirituality provides criteria for evaluating these other sources of knowledge. Such criteria spring from theological reflection enriched by the contemplative prayers of the Exercises.[174]

By adapting and appropriating the Exercises, Brackley provides persons and communities engaged in the struggle for justice an opportunity to deepen their self-awareness and ground their commitments in faith inspired by God's vision for His people – the Reign of God. The prayers in the Exercises give people the chance to know better not only their God but also themselves, weaknesses and all, and in so doing, to discover how God calls them to be co-laborers in His vineyard.[175] By integrating spirituality, Brackley's framework attends to that aspect of political effectiveness related to the formation of virtues and character in the very agents who can change and direct the laws, policies, structures, and communities. Prevot believes that Brackley walked his talk.

> Brackley's text – together with the example of his courageous, committed life – gives us reason to believe that a sustained practice of spiritual discernment such as this can empower a form of liberative politics more effectively than the mere idea of liberation theology alone (that is, in the absence of such spirituality) and more effectively than any secular transposition of this idea.[176]

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[173]Prevot, "Ignatian Spirituality, Political Effectiveness, and Spiritual Discernment," 317-8. See Brackley, *Divine Revolution*, 96-122 and *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 9, 26, 91.

[174]Ibid., 318.

[175]Ibid., 319-20.

[176]Ibid., 21.

# PAUL'S CONVERSION EXPERIENCE AND HIS POST-CONVERSION VIEW OF AND RELATIONSHIP WITH JUDAISM

*Diego Roger D'Souza, SFX*

## Introduction

Paul's encounter with the risen Christ was a crucial event in his life and the life of the early Church. The divine-human encounter piloted his apostolic mission to the Gentiles and the propagation of the Jesus movement worldwide. It is common to speak of this life-altering moment as the beginning of Paul's spiritual conversion. However, conversion has been a subject of theological consideration for some time. In a general sense, conversion involves points of departure and arrival, from a former to a new way of living spiritually and morally, and teachings to which this new lifestyle is anchored, for example, religious or ideological beliefs.

The visible change in the life of Paul following his encounter with Jesus Christ was undeniable. Having been a zealous persecutor of the followers of the Way, all of a sudden, he became one of its most ardent promoters.[1] The points of departure and arrival are present in his shift from being a pious Jew who upholds the *Torah* and the traditions taught by his ancestors to being a follower of Christ. This article sincerely endeavors to understand this subtle yet radical change in Paul's life and its effect on Judaism.

[1]Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 302.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars assumed that Paul abandoned Judaism for Christianity. However, there was a shift in perspective as scholars of the later 20th century argued against Paul's religious conversion.[2] Comprehending the nature of Paul's conversion experience and his post-conversion relationship with Judaism is complex. Thus, this article will raise relevant questions concerning Paul's conversion experience and his post-conversion adherence to the Jewish religion. What change did Paul undergo in his conversion? Did he change his religion? If the converted Paul remained a Jew, what do we make of his critiques on the *Torah* and the election of Israelites (vis-a-vis the mission to the Gentiles)? Having been raised in a broader Hellenistic world, Paul must have found Jewish exclusiveness quite disturbing. He did abandon Jewish particularism, which upheld the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and declared that "there is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28). Hence, it would be proper to say that Paul discarded the narrow and exclusivist worldview of Judaism to embrace a universal Judaism, devoid of differentiation.

And finally, did Paul not see Jesus Christ as fulfilling Jewish hopes and expectations (Mt 5:17) and concluded with the Christ-faith as the "true development and completion of the Jewish faith?"[3] Can we not understand Paul's Gentile mission as a Christ-centered reinterpretation of one of the Israel-centered patterns of universalism?[4]

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[2]Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1 and 9. The traditional view that there was an absolute contradiction between Paul and Judaism was challenged by the contemporary scholars. They also challenged the idea that Paul liberated Christianity from the burden of the Jewish law.

[3]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 305.

[4]G. N. Stanton, "Galatians," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1155

## Paul's Christ-Encounter in Pauline Letters and Acts: An Exegetical Study

This exegetical study focuses on the biblical texts that recount the foundational event—Paul's encounter with the risen Christ, which triggered his conversion. The biblical texts to be used will be the Lukan and Pauline narratives. Although the *Acts* and the *Pauline* letters differ in writing styles, purposes, theological motives, and addressees, they share the plot of Paul's conversion from a former Pharisee to a missionary of Christ to the Gentiles.[5]

### Paul's Christ-Encounter in Paul's Own Words

Paul speaks of his encounter with the risen Christ on three different occasions (Gal 1:12, 15-16a; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-10; and perhaps 2 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:4b-11). Though the context may vary each time, "the consequences of the experience—the conviction that God had raised Jesus, making him Christ and Lord; the conviction that God had commissioned Paul, making him an apostle to the Gentiles—are everywhere present, as an assumption or as theme."[6] Paul did not voluntarily speak of his Christ encounter but always brought up the subject when provoked by his opponents.[7] Time and again, the legitimacy of his apostolic authority and his Gospel were disputed (Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 11:5; 1 Thess. 2:3-6) because he had not seen or met the historical Jesus and was not named among the Twelve. When

[5]While Luke situates Paul's Christ-encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul himself does not mention the place of his encounter with the risen Christ.

[6]Terence L. Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1065.

[7]Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His life and Theology* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), 93.

challenged, he was forced to fall back on his Christ experience. In doing so, he linked his call to be an apostle directly with the resurrection appearance of Jesus.[8] Here, we shall look at the three Pauline texts recounting his encounter with Christ.

## Galatians 1:12-16a

In Gal. 1:12-16a, Paul obstinately states that the Gospel he received is not from human authority or origin, ἀλλὰ δί ἀπὸ καλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (but through a revelation of/from Jesus Christ—v.12). The key noun in v.12 is ἀποκάλυψις, which is usually understood in the light of apocalyptic writings, often referring to the unveiling of what was previously hidden (i.e. the 'revelation' or 'disclosure' of Jesus Christ).[9] The ἀποκάλυψις in v.12 refers to the all-important and unique Christ encounter that Paul reportedly experienced on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19a), and not the various visions and revelations of the kind mentioned in 2 Cor 12:1.[10] In this sense, God's revelation to Paul is understood as 'God's disclosure of his Son Jesus Christ.'[11] Here, Paul speaks of the revelation in terms of uncovering a

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[8]James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 99.

[9]Stanton, "Galatians," 1154

[10]Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 88.

[11]Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 229. See also Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 89. When the construction of ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is taken as a subjective genitive, it indicates Christ as the Revealer or the Source of the Gospel. But when seen in connection with the phrase ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί (to reveal his Son in/to me) in v.16a, the 'revelation of Jesus Christ' in v.12 appears to be an objective genitive, meaning, that it is the 'revelation about Jesus Christ' and not 'from Jesus Christ.'

truth rather than the seeing of a person—a mental perception rather than a visual perception.[12]

In vv.15-16a, Paul's remarkable change is ascribed to God himself; his induction into the ministry was due to God's "good pleasure" (εὐδόκησεν), God's "separating" (ἀφορίσας), God's "calling" (καλέσας) and God's "revealing" (ἀποκαλύψαι).[13] The word εὐδόκησεν indicates God's purpose, resolve, and choice[14] and serves to emphasize the soteriological dimension of the event for the person of Paul. In contrast, the word, ἀφορίσας emphasizes the universal dimension of the event since Paul is 'set apart' to preach among the Gentiles.[15] In speaking about his call and commissioning, Paul alludes to the Old Testament narratives of the prophets. He understands that God called him in a prophet-like manner. His claim, '*God had set me apart before I was born,*" echoes Jer. 1:5 and Is. 49:1, 5. Like Jeremiah, God arrested him and summoned him into service (Jer. 1:4-19). Like Deutero-Isaiah, he is a servant of Yahweh separated from his mother's womb (before he was born). He was tasked with bringing light to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16b; c.f. Rom. 1:1; Is. 49:1,6). He is to fulfill the proclamation, announced in the Old Testament but not yet carried out, of the saving will of God that includes the Gentiles.[16]

The key word in v.16a is ἀποκαλύψαι (to reveal) is an aorist infinitive active form of the verb ἀποκαλύπτω. In Christian theology, revelation refers to the significant self-disclosure of God to man. Ἀποκαλύπτω is a compound word formed from

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[12]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 104.

[13]Thomas Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 31.

[14]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 53.

[15]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 90.

[16]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 89-90.

καλύπτω (to hide/conceal) and preposition ἄπο (from), and carries the idea of unveiling something previously hidden.[17] The revelation Paul received during the Christ encounter was fundamental to his apostolic calling because the content of his proclamation to the Gentiles is contained in it. In this apocalyptic vision, he reached an understanding of the Son of God.[18] The words Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ (his Son) reflected Jesus' divine sonship in the unique, ontological sense (Rom 1:3f; 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 4:4; 1 Thes1:10) and indicated that Paul received an insight into Jesus' unique divine sonship as well as his Lordship and Messiahship.[19]

When the words ἐν ἐμοί in v.16a are translated as a simple dative (to me),[20] this heightens the subjectivity of the revelation of Christ as Paul's personal subjective experience.[21] But when translated literally as 'in me,' it entails that the Christ encounter left in Paul an indelible imprint of the presence of Christ so that through him, the glory of Christ will reach the Gentiles. "In me" also reflects the "inward and intensely personal character of God's revelation to him of the risen Jesus."[22] This does not rule out the seeing of an external object and should not

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[17]*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Vol. III,* 309-310. Other words with similar meaning include δελόω, derived from δῆλος, which means 'make clear' or 'manifest,' calls more attention to the goal, i.e. as a result something becomes known and manifest. Ἐπιφάνεια, from the root φαν (cf. φαίνομαι, appear; φανερόω, let be seen) suggests a visual appearance or a manifestation of deity. Other relevant concepts include γνωρίζω, make known (knowledge, art. γινώσκω); ὅραμα, an apparition (something seen) and ὀπτασία, a vision.

[18]Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul* (Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 84.

[19]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 55.

[20]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 90.

[21]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 105.

[22]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

be taken as implying a merely inward revelation. The words ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ connote a disclosure involving perception and understanding on the part of the recipient. The inward illumination and the physical vision are intimately linked and are part of God's revelation to Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8).[23]

## First Corinthians 9:1

In 1 Cor 9:1, Paul defends the legitimacy of his apostleship based on his Christ encounter. Without mentioning the time and place, he claims that he has 'seen' Jesus the Lord (9:1; c.f. 15:3-11).[24] He unleashes four rhetorical questions (9:1), "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?" Each question begins with the Greek negative particle οὐ, expecting a positive answer: 'Of course I am; of course, I am an apostle; of course, I have seen Jesus; of course you are.'[25]

In the sentence "οὐχὶ Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἑόρακα?" (Have I not seen Jesus the Lord – 9:1), we notice a question with a double emphasis, namely, the words "Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον" and "ἑόρακα." **ἑόρακα (Have seen)** in perfect tense and is deliberately[26] used to imply "an event which took place in the past and

[23]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

[24]John Barclay, "1 Corinthians," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1122

[25]Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 393-94. Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor 9:1-2).

[26]Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 573. As Moulton points out, the perfect tense is most important, exegetically, of all the Greek tenses. The perfect is used less frequently than the present, aorist, future, or imperfect; when it is used, there is usually a deliberate choice on the part of the writer.

whose effect is still operative – an event which made possible and constituted Paul's existence as an apostle."[27] In other words, it means that Paul had seen Jesus at a point in time in the past, and its effect continues in the present in such a way that his initial experience of the risen Christ once and for all constitutes his existence as an apostle.[28] It also means this initial experience was distinctive and unique, different from the subsequent experiences.[29]

The introductory οὐχί is emphatic, insisting on the affirmative response[30] it requires, while the surrounding questions have the simple οὐ(κ). It implies Paul declaring affirmatively, "Surely I have seen Jesus, our Lord, have I not?" The reference to Christ, Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν also comes in the emphatic expression "Jesus, the Lord of us," implying that "the earthly Jesus who by resurrection has assumed his place of lordship, and that lordship is over us as well."[31] Here, Paul adopts a semi-technical language to speak of the risen Christ. He is "Jesus," the name of the Son of God in his incarnation, and he is "our Lord," having become so through his resurrection from the dead.[32]

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[27]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 103.

[28]Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 573. The force of the perfect tense is simply that it describes an event that, completed in the past, has results that are existing in the present time. Or as Zerwick puts it, the perfect tense is used for "indicating not the past action as such but the present 'state of affairs' resulting from the past action."

[29]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 103. James Dunn notes that in 1 Cor 9:1, Paul refrains from using the word ὀπτασίας (visions) to describe his Christ-encounter as he does in 2 Corinthians 12:1.

[30]Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 355.

[31]Fee, *Pauline Christology,* 126. The only other place in the corpus where this exact combination occurs—both Jesus and Lord, followed by "our"—is Rom 4:24, which is likewise a reference to the risen Lord.

[32]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 395.

## First Corinthians 15:5-10

In 1 Cor. 15:5-8, Paul includes himself among the series of witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus while addressing the question about bodily resurrection.[33] Paul emphasizes the objective reality of Christ's death and resurrection by mentioning the four truths of the Christian faith: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures (15:3); that he was buried (15:4a); that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures (15:4b) and that he appeared on different occasions to Cephas, to the twelve, to the five hundred brothers and sisters, to James and all the apostles,[34] and finally to Paul himself.

The point of Paul's rhetoric is that Christ's appearing to him, "abnormal" as it was (15:8), fulfills for him one of the criteria to be an apostle, i.e., to have 'seen' the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1; c.f. Acts 1:21-22). These texts (9:1; 15:8-10) serve as an apologetic for Paul's apostleship and his apostolic ministry among the Corinthians. This is evident from "the parallel uses

[33]John Schutz, *First Corinthians*, 82. In general, the Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, but they did not accept the resurrection of the body. To them the resurrection of the body was unthinkable in view of the fact that they held the body to be the source of man's weakness and sin. Death, therefore, was very welcome, since by it, the soul would be liberated from the body; but resurrection was not welcome, because this would constitute another descent of the soul into the grave of the body.

[34]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 731. An appearance of the resurrected Jesus to James is recorded in the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews, and Acts 1:6-11 reflects a tradition of several appearances to those who would come to be known as apostles. This James is the Lord's brother, who, along with his other brothers, "did not believe in him" during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 7:2-9), but who appeared with the disciples after the Resurrection. At some early stage he became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. In Gal 1:17-19, Paul uses the term "apostle" to imply that both Peter and James were apostles before him. The words "to all the apostles' may either refer strictly to the Twelve or it could also mean a larger group to whom the Lord appeared and who came to be known as apostles.

of ὁράω (to see) in 15:5, 7 and 8 and in the way 15:8 is connected to the rest of the paragraph."[35] In each case, the listing and the use of the same verb (o`ra,w) indicates that Paul understood his encounter with the risen Christ to be the same as the others. The only difference in Paul's case was the timing; it happened after such appearances had ceased.[36] The ὤφθη of 1 Cor. 15:5-8 demonstrates that all those listed here were convinced that it was the same reality, the same Jesus crucified, dead, and buried who appeared to them.[37]

The keywords in both these texts (1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8-10) are ἑόρακά and ὤφθη, forms of the verb ὁράω. In 9:1, where the verb ἑώρακα (I have seen) is used in the perfect tense, where Paul is the active subject, but in 15:8, the passive form ὤφθη κἀμοί (he also appeared to me) is used to show Paul as a passive object.[38] The passive ὤφθη implies that the initiative was indeed Christ's 'to appear' before the apostles and lastly to Paul (15:5-8). The initiative in the 'seeing,' lay not with the seer but with the one seen, who appeared and showed himself to (dative).[39] Paul himself was convinced that what he saw was external to him; it was Jesus alive from the dead, alive in a new mode of existence (spiritual body). Both the verbs, ἑώρακά and ὁράω carry an exclusively Christological-soteriological meaning, and both the texts, 9:1 and 15:8, "manifest a firm connection between vision/appearance and election to apostleship."[40]

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[35]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 88.

[36]Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 126.

[37]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 133.

[38]*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 451-452.

[39]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 108.

[40]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 88-89.

Although the object of Paul's seeing appears to be indescribable, if not ambiguous, he confidently lays claim to the changes it effected in him, namely, his call and commission to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16) and the Corinthian community coming to faith in Christ (1 Cor. 9:2; 15:2,11). According to James Dunn, his Christ experience is neither subjective nor objective; it lies somewhere in between, a visionary perception, the content of which remains disputed.[41] His seeing was visionary in mode (Gal. 1:12, 16, Acts 26:19) but also an accurate perception of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8).

## The Lukan Accounts of the Christ-Encounter (Acts 9:1-19a; 22:1-22; 26:2-29)

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke gives us a three-fold narrative of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He emphasizes the conversion of Paul, who earlier persecuted the church of Christ but then became its greatest advocate. Though Luke does not address Paul as an apostle, he has all the features that an apostle should have, namely, he has seen the risen Christ, the κύριος, he has been filled with the Holy Spirit, and has begun to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. He refers to Paul as a 'chosen instrument' to carry the Good News to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), a "witness" of the risen Christ (Acts 22:15) who has perceived the "light" and the "glory" (22:6, 9, 11) and is designated to know His will and see the Righteous One (22:14); he is called in a prophet like manner as he is commanded by the Lord to get up and to stand on his feet (Acts 26:16a; c.f. Ezek. 2:1-3); is appointed a servant and witness by the Lord (26:16b, Jer. 1:4-10) and is sent to open people's eyes (26:18, c.f. Is. 35:5, 42:7).

[41]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 106.

## Summary

In his writings, Paul emphasizes the God-given revelation of his Son Jesus Christ and his call and commission in a prophet-like manner (Gal 1:15-16; 2 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:4b-11). He makes the all-important claim that he has seen Jesus alive from the dead (1 Cor. 9.1; 1 Cor 15:8). In his narration of the event of his Christ encounter, Paul's answer concerning what he saw is wide-ranging, "Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12), "his Son" (Gal. 1:16), "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1), the pronoun "he" (1 Cor. 15:8), and "light from heaven" (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13). Paul's 'seeing' appears to be non-physical, non-objective and something that appeared from heaven (Acts 26:19; 2 Cor 4:6; Gal 1:12, 15-16a), except in 1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8, where he claims actually to have seen something objectively just like the other apostles did. His words, "*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord*?" (1 Cor. 9:1), and "*he appeared also to me*" (1 Cor. 15:8) establish the belief that his Christ experience was more than a mere vision.

From the exegetical study of the biblical texts emerges the crucial insight that Paul saw the risen Christ, and in his seeing, he received the decisive revelation that Jesus is the Son of God. This God-given revelation of his Son triggered in Paul his conversion to Christ. In his conversion experience, Paul saw a higher purpose that God was calling him to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; c.f. Acts 26:13-18), and from it, he deduced the heart of his Gospel.[42]

## Defining Paul's Conversion

The significant themes in this discussion include the idea of conversion, the conversion terminology in the Bible, and the definition of Paul's conversion to Christ.

[42]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

## Conversion Terminology in the Bible

The process of conversion, which involves giving a new direction to one's life and thought processes and a judgment on one's previous views and behavior, is expressed in the New Testament by three words, namely ἐπιστρέφω, μεταμέλομαι and μετανοέω. The words ἐπιστρέφω and μετανοέω, both mean 'turn round' or 'turn oneself round,' referring to an individual's conversion brought about by the influence of the Holy Spirit.[43]

Ἐπιστρέφω is used for an individual's conversion, which involves a complete transformation of his/her existence under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Μεταμέλομαι, on the other hand, expresses regret, remorse, and repentance for error, debt, failure, or sin.[44] There is a looking back, but it does not necessarily involve a turning to God. Whereas, μετανοέω is much closer to ἐπιστρέφω (cf. Acts 3:19; 26:20). It expresses a conscious turning from sin, a change of mind and of the whole inner attitude to life, without which true conversion is not possible.[45] Ἐπιστρέφω has a broader meaning than μετανοέω,

[43]Frank Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέφω)," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Vol. I,* ed. Colin Brown (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 353. Also see, James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "ἐπιστρέφω," *Bible Hub*, accessed 23 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/1994.htm.

[44]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "μεταμέλομαι," *Bible Hub*, accessed 23 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/3338.htm. *Metaméllomai* from *metá*, which means "change after being with," and *mélō*, meaning "care, be concerned with" means "to experience a change of concern after a change of emotion and usually implying to regret, i.e. falling into emotional remorse afterwards. *Metaméllomai* in the papyri (P Thead 51.15, iv/ad) also means "regret" and for example is used of a thief, "Otherwise you will have reason *to be sorry* for it," (*MM*, 403). Also see, Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010).

[45]Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010), 117.

for it always includes faith, while μετανοέω and πιστεύω can stand together and complement each other.

The Greek word ἐπιστρέφω in the Septuagint is translated from the Hebrew word *shub* (ש ו ב ).[46] The word *shub,* which means to turn round, to return, to bring back, to restore,[47] appears in the Hebrew Bible 1,146 times.[48] Its various usages include, "Abraham returned home" (Genesis 18:33, similar usage in Ruth 1:6); "He himself turned back to Eglon..." (Judges 3:19; similar usage in 1 Kings 19:21); the people "turn from their sin" (1 Kings 8:35); he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled (2 Kings 24:1).[49] For the ancient Israelites conversion did not mean change, but a specific and goal-oriented redirection, or an active and deliberate interaction with, and choosing the will of YHWH.[50] Closest to the contemporary use of 'convert,' *shub* can also refer to the prominent prophetic motif of Israel's return to God (Jer. 3:1– 4:4; Isaiah 55) that leads to a renewed relationship with God.[51]

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[46]Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέπω)," 354.

[47]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "*shub*," *Bible Hub,* accessed 25 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7725.htm.

[48]Bailey V. Gillespie, *Religious Conversion & Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979), 12-17.

[49]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 70.

[50]Gillespie, *Religious Conversion & Personal Identity*, 13.

[51]Jervis, "Conversion," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1539. What is necessary is that the people sincerely repent and return to God in truth and justice (Jer 4:1–4),a move that itself requires God's strengthening of Israel(Jer 3:22). This return is not a conversion in the sense of a change of religious affiliation but a renewed relationship with God (See page 15).

In its classical and common usage, ἐπιστρέφω did not carry spiritual or religious connotations.[52] Ἐπιστρέφω is found 36 times in the NT. Eighteen times it has a secular meaning implying physical returning or turning away (Matt. 10:13; 12:44, 24:18; Mark 5:30, 8:33; Luke 2:39, 8:55; 2 Pet. 2: 22). However, it also carries a spiritual meaning and is used 18 times with its theological meaning of conversion especially in the Synoptics, Acts and the Epistles (Mk. 4:12; Lk. 1:16f; 22:32; Acts 15:19; 2 Cor. 3:16; Jas. 5:19f). Ἐπιστρέφω also has a related form ἐπιστροφή (ῆς, ἡ) which appears only once in the NT in Acts 15:3 and it means 'conversion or turning' of Gentiles from idolatry to true God.[53] In the epistle of James, ἐπιστρέφω implies 'bringing back' a sinner (turn away) from wandering from the truth (5:19-20). In Acts 3:19, ἐπιστρέφω carries the theological sense of repentance and turning to God. Thus, the essential meaning of the term is "that of a turn, a change of direction, a reversal of life."[54]

In describing his encounter with Christ, Paul also uses the term καλέω to capture the motif of the prophetic call (Gal 1:15-16). Referring to this experience as a moment of divine calling, he uses the verb καλέω, on 26 occasions; the noun κλῆσις, four times; and the adjective κλητός, seven times in his letters. The word καλέω could mean 'call, call in, name, invite, summon, designate.'[55] In Gal. 1:15-16a, Paul also speaks of revelation (ἀπὸ

[52]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 71

[53]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "ἐπιστροφή (ῆς, ἡ)," *Bible Hub*, accessed 30 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/1995.htm.

[54]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 72

[55]Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, 93. See also Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 72.

καλύπτω), saying, "God...was pleased to reveal his Son to/in me (Gal 1:16a)." In this case, he thinks of his "conversion" not in terms of what happened to him but in terms of the revelation taking place in him. The one revealed in Paul is Jesus Christ, God's own Son.[56]

Thus, the Biblical understanding of conversion implies a fundamental turning to the principles and the will of God, return home from blindness and error to the source of light and life, Jesus Christ our Savior (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:25). The use of ἐπιστρέφω also suggests that we are not merely concerned with 'turning away' from the old life, but that the stress is on 'turning to Christ,' and through him to God and so to a new life. It involves a fundamental change in life (Acts 26:20) with a new outlook and objectives.[57] Though Paul's conversion may not have necessarily involved repentance,[58] it gave him a new outlook and objective. It led him to re-evaluate his thought processes concerning the actions of God in the salvation of the world and to reorient his life to be a missionary to the gentiles.

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[56]Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 221. The surprise (in terms of our expectations) is twofold: (1) Paul thinks of his "conversion" not in terms of what happened to me, or what Christ lovingly did for me, but of the revelation taking place in me; and (2) who is revealed is not "Christ" or "the Lord Jesus" but God's own Son. See also discussion on Gal 1:15-16a in Chapter 2, pg. 14-20.

[57]Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέπω)," 355.

[58]Steve N. Ransome, "Paul's Transformation and how it has shaped his Christology and Pneumatology" (MA Thesis, Regis College, University of Toronto, 2019), 74. Commenting on Galatians 1:15-16, Ransome notes that "the words set apart, call, reveal, are used with great consideration and yet, Paul does not articulate a sense of turning around, repentance, or rejection of his past - he does not use the word for conversion."

Also see, L. Ann Jervis, "Conversion," The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1538. The story of Saul's conversion makes no reference to his repentance(although his behavior might reflect such change). Similarly, there is no reference to repentance in the Cornelius episode and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40).

## Paul's Conversion to Christ

In this discussion on Paul's conversion, we have been able to ascertain that there was a radical change in Paul's life following his encounter with Christ. Paul himself divides his life into 'former' and 'present' (pre and post-Christ periods), a time characterized by zealous observance of the *Torah* and persecution of the Church of Christ, and a time of grace and the proclamation of the Gospel (Gal. 1:13-16).[59] How do we explain this change/transformation in Paul? The traditional and psychological approach to Paul's conversion, while emphasizing Paul's disillusionment with the Jewish law and the Jewish religion, asserted that Paul walked away from Judaism to embrace Christianity as his new religion. The recent scholarship, however, has moved on from such an understanding of Paul's conversion. K. Stendahl, while dismissing the idea of a switch of religions, understood Paul's conversion as a change in Paul's understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ, from a crucified criminal to a glorified Messiah and Son of God.[60]

Earlier, Paul upheld the Deuteronomic position that '*anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse*' (Deut. 21:23). Following his encounter with Christ, Paul had to rethink everything that he had come to believe about Jesus of Nazareth. He became convinced that Christ was the Lord, who is now seated at the Father's right hand (Ps 110:1; Phil 2:9-11). According to A. G. Lyons, the contrast between Paul the persecutor and Paul the persecuted preacher, between his 'formerly' and 'now', is well attested throughout the Pauline corpus (cf. Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:110-2:21). This has to do with how Paul understood Jesus before and after his conversion. Before his encounter with

[59]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070. In Gal 1:13, Paul uses the term πότϵ, meaning 'formerly', or which is left behind.

[60]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314

Christ, he viewed Jesus from a fallen human perspective, but he no longer does so (2 Cor 5:15-17).[61]

We see here a transvaluation of values and a change in Paul's understanding of things such as the nature of the Godhead, the law, the basis of the salvation of Jews and Gentiles, and a host of other things.[62] As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had theological reasons to persecute the followers of Jesus. He believed it was blasphemy to proclaim a crucified man (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13) as God's Messiah and that if Jesus was the Way to salvation, then the law's centrality was compromised. But after his Christ encounter, Jesus took center stage, and the law was demoted accordingly. Although he subsequently abandoned the Mosaic Law as a rule of life, he never lost the sense of the scriptures as God's communication with his people.[63] His newfound convictions were not simply the inversion of the old. He continued to believe in the God of Israel, in Israel's election, and even in the divine origin of the *Torah*. But these native convictions were redrawn around a new center, the foundational conviction that God had raised the crucified Jesus.[64] Thenceforth, the crucified Christ became the content of his proclamation. Paul's conversion experience thus becomes the source of his Christological doctrine[65] , and his conversion can be considered an intra-Judaism change in teaching revolving around the figure of Christ.[66] It involved "a radical reassessment of

[61]George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 146.

[62]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 315

[63]Jerome M. O'Connor, *Paul: His Story* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

[64]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070.

[65]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 74.

[66]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 24.

the person of Jesus and a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of his foundational convictions."[67]

In his letter to the Philippians (3:4b-11), Paul sees his experience as a paradigmatic expression of the great contrast between life under the law and the transforming grace of the new life 'in Christ.' Coming to know Jesus Christ brought about a reversal in Paul's life. His judgment on all the former advantages, everything that he considered gained, was now considered lost (Phil. 3:7–8). Commenting on Paul's emptying in Phil. 3:4b-11, Pheme Perkins says, "Conversion implies an 'emptying' analogous to that of Christ."

In the encounter with the risen Christ, Paul had the profound experience of 'being found/captured' by Christ (Phil 3:9, 12). Paul's entire life was shaped by his sharing in Christ's death and resurrection (Phil 3:10–11). This process of being transformed 'in Christ' was a continuing and ongoing process in Paul's life as he responded to the call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12–14). And because Paul underwent a total transformation 'in Christ,' he saw his relation to his readers as a type to be imitated (Phil 3:15–17).

## Summary

After his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul continued to worship and serve the same God, but "his framework of service shifted decisively from one organizing center (*Torah*) to another (Christ)."[68] What term best describes this decisive shift? The term 'conversion' may not be the most suitable to describe Paul's experience. Ransom Steve observes that "nowhere in his description (nor anywhere in his letters) does he mention the word conversion or μετάνοια. The words, "set apart," "call," and

[67]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070.

[68]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1066.

"reveal" are used with great consideration, and yet, Paul does not articulate a sense of turning around, repentance, or rejection of his past—he does not use the word for conversion."[69] One alternative is to use less loaded terms such as transformation or reconfiguration. L. Ann Jervis suggests that "the term transformation be used for Paul's particular conversion since it is not a change of religions but a radical reinterpretation of his understanding of God's actions in and will for the world."[70] Another alternative is to redefine the word "conversion" to preserve continuity and discontinuity.

In conclusion, Paul's conversion experience can be plainly understood as a movement from his false notion of 'who Jesus is' to the true notion concerning Jesus' identity. If earlier, he deemed Jesus to be a crucified criminal (Deut. 21:23), in his conversion, he recognized the Lordship, the Messiahship, and the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ. Thus, his conversion experience can be seen primarily as accepting a new set of convictions about Jesus rather than abandoning an old set of convictions about Judaism. As Steve Ransome explains, "Paul still maintained his Jewish identity as was evident in key parts of his letters and as was revealed on his circumcised body, and yet there were some aspects that evolved, changed and that Paul took on that were very new – his Christ identity."[71] In this way, it is possible to accept that Paul was not frustrated with Judaism or misunderstood it, but he was convinced that the God of his ancestors, the God of Israel, had raised Jesus from death. His conversion is neither 'a consequence of' nor 'a solution to'a problem in one religion. Still, it is a reconfiguration or

[69]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 75.

[70]Jervis, "Conversion," in The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1540.

[71]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 75. The complexity of the two realities, his life in Judaism and his life 'in Christ,' somehow co-existed in the life, ministry, and writing of Paul.

revaluation of the set of values within the ambit of the same religion.

## Converted Paul's Rootedness in the Jewish Religion

Having defined Paul's conversion as a conversion to Christ, we now examine Paul's post-conversion view and his allegiance to the Jewish religion. The essential claim of this study is that Paul's conversion to Christ did not lead him to abandon his Jewish faith. It necessitates explaining how his new life 'in Christ' was still a continuation and development of the Jewish faith. To explain Paul's continued dependence on Jewish categories, I have presented four arguments.

### First Argument: Paul's Universal Judaism

Paul's mission among the Gentiles resulted not from a rejection of Judaism, but it had basis in attitudes already present in Judaism, namely, Jewish universalism which the prophets spoke about in the Old Testament (Is. 2:1-4; 25:6; 49:6; Mic. 4:1-5; Zech. 2:11, 8:20-23). Jewish universalism found ways to accommodate Gentiles within the realm of God's plan of salvation. One such pattern was proselytism, by which Jews were willing to accept those Gentiles who embraced the *Torah* and its Way of life, as full members of the family of Abraham.[72] Another pattern is assumed that in the future, the Gentiles would be included among the righteous, even if they do not adhere to

[72]G. N. Stanton (ed.), *Paul: Crisis in Galatia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 17. The Hebrew Bible contains rules for the sojourner who lives within the land of Israel (Lev. 17-25). The sojourner who conforms to Israel's customs was to be treated on equal footing with the native-born Israelite with regard to the civil law (Lev. 24:22) and he was to have the same religious duties and privileges as the native-born Israelite in regard to the religious law (Lev. 17:8-15). This includes the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-34; Num. 19:1-10) and the Passover (Num. 9:14; Ex. 12:19).

the aspects of the *Torah* (Josephus. Ant. 20.34-48).[73] The last pattern required the Gentiles to acknowledge the God of Israel and be granted a place among the righteous in the end times (cf. Isa 2:2-4; Tob 14:5-7).[74] The expectation was recognizing Israel's God, resulting in a great influx of Gentiles into God's Kingdom. Such Gentiles, who were not required to undergo conversion to Judaism, are "God-fearers," and along with the Jews, would witness to the one God and His ethical standards of righteousness.

In his mission to the Gentiles, Paul adopted a Christ-centered approach, in which the ultimate goal is the final salvation of all people (Rom. 10:9-13; 11:26-32). Jewish ethnocentrism, which Paul saw as particularism or patriotism, was to be replaced by his Gospel's vision of an inclusive humanity. Recent scholars such as James Dunn and N. T. Wright have shown that with Christ's coming, the Jewish identity markers, such as Sabbath, circumcision, food habits, etc., were replaced by the all-inclusive identity marker, 'faith in Jesus Christ.' These observations should encourage us to identify Paul's notion of an all-inclusive Judaism as universal Judaism.

## The Second Argument: Paul and the Relevance of the Torah

The second argument addresses the issue of the significance of the *Torah* in the Messianic era ushered by the coming of Jesus Christ. The argument, while underlining the interim and pedagogical role of the *Torah* to discipline and to prepare people for the coming of Christ, points out that with the arrival of Jesus Christ, the law of Christ takes precedence over the Mosaic Law. Paul's critique of the *Torah* is not to be construed

[73]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1068.

[74]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1067-68.

as his rejection of Judaism. His *Torah*-critique merely emphasizes his firm conviction that justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through *Torah*-observance. Though the *Torah* remained the norm for moral/ethical conduct after Christ's coming, it lost its divisive power, which held back the universal unity destined to come. Christ redeemed all people from the discriminating suppression of the law to bring about the universality of faith (Gal. 3:13-14).

## The Third Argument: Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith

The third argument focuses on the theme of justification brought about by faithful obedience to Jesus Christ and by a believer's faith in Jesus Christ. It explains how Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was a means to actualize Jewish universalism. The non-Jews who earlier had no part in the covenant community had become participants in the community of God's people through their faith in Jesus Christ. As a mode of responding to God and as a universal capacity deeply embedded within every human being, faith transcended ethnic identity (Rom. 10:1–17). Faith was a time-honored way of relating to God since the time of Abraham. Christ manifested the same faith principle in his total obedience to the Father's will. Christ's faith and the believer's faith in Christ are the basis for our justification and a means for the inclusion of the Gentiles among God's people.

## The Fourth Argument: Paul's Call to be an Apostle to the Gentiles

The fourth argument is grounded on Paul's calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles. In his calling, he resembles the outstanding figures of the Old Testament, such as Moses, Joshua, Isaiah,

Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who were predestined before their birth and "called" at the chosen moment by God (Gal. 1:15-16). When God calls someone by his name (Is 43:1; 45:3; 49:1), it is to entrust him with a mission. Similarly, Paul was called to be the bearer of a mission to be carried out among the Gentiles to whom he would transmit the Gospel he received. At the heart of his Gospel was the proclamation that the faithful obedience to Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, has fulfilled the promise made to Abraham (that all nations will be blessed in him (Gen. 12:3)). In carrying out his apostolic mission among the Gentiles, Paul became a servant of the Lord and a light to the nations in fulfillment of the prophetic mission announced in the Old Testament, but yet to be executed.

## Conclusion

We have set out to define Paul's conversion experience and the nature of his relationship with Judaism after his conversion. Through our study of the relevant biblical texts, as well as the views of scholars at different times, we have inferred that Paul's conversion experience was a conversion to Christ. His conversion was about accepting a new set of convictions concerning Jesus, namely his Messiahship, Lordship, and divine Sonship, rather than rejecting Judaism as a belief system. The converted Paul remained loyal to the God of Israel, the God of his ancestors. He believed in the promises God had made to his ancestors, and in his Christ experience, he realized that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of God's promises ands Jewish hopes and expectations.

In this article, we have approached Paul as an insider and a reformer within Judaism. As an insider, he took the liberty to correct the errors of his Jewish brethren concerning the Lordship and Messiahship of Jesus Christ. He critiqued the *Torah* only to present Christ as the only means to salvation

and to give the Gentiles an easy passage into the community of faith. He was convinced that faithful obedience to Jesus Christ manifested in His passion on the cross and a believer's faith in Jesus Christ were the only means to justification. As a faithful Jew called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, he set out to proclaim this Gospel to the Gentiles and to establish a universal community of faith united in Jesus Christ. Christianity, for Paul, was a logical continuation and fulfillment of the Jewish religion.

# THE THEOLOGY OF BEGGING IN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

*Jose John B. Fuertes*

## Introduction

The definition and meaning of begging may vary depending on the perspective one adopts. In the modern parlance, it would denote parasitism, dependency, or worse, indolence, which is directly opposite to the standards that the "world" dictates: independence, empowerment. On the one hand, begging can be historically conditioned – either associated with the collapse of the human socio-political structure, or with a generation's pursuit of spiritual goodness and perfection. Historically, according to John L. Gillin, who served as President of the American Sociological Society, begging could not be found in early human societies. It is, however, a phenomenon brought about by civilized society. [1] He presupposes that early humans had their own way of extending help to the needy, including travelers. Gillin suggests that begging is a product of "periods of social and economic disorganizations."[2] This aspect of begging involves moral and ethical questions.

Moreover, the concept of begging can go beyond the mere physical dimension. It can be fueled by something other than material provision for survival. Some beg voluntarily, stripping themselves of comfort and security and allowing themselves to be dependent on other people's generosity as a way of cultivating spiritual freedom. Earlier religions such as Buddhism and

[1]John Gillin, "Vagrancy and Begging," *American Journal of Sociology* 5, No. 3 (Nov. 1929): 424.

[2]Ibid., 425

Hinduism believe and teach that begging instills virtue and a deeper understanding of oneself in relation to the world.

However, in the realm of prayer and spirituality, especially that of the Ignatian tradition, begging assumes a significant place. David Fleming suggests that Ignatius typically employs the term "poor" to depict Jesus, aligning with how the gospels portray him. Ignatius wanted his followers to imitate that poor Jesus. This is made explicit in his meditations on the three degrees of humility. [3] Thus, to pray is to be poor before God.

## Begging in Church History and its Influence on Ignatius

### History of Begging Leading towards the Middle Ages

Christianity, in its rich history, has its own share of begging and poverty – ideal and literal. Taking the lead from how Jesus lived and the ideals he presented and lived out, there is no doubt that it seems appealing for some followers. This imitation of Christ has been the inspiration of some religious orders. Poverty, in religious parlance, could be understood from different perspectives, either material or spiritual poverty, which will eventually aid one in ones's search for God. Thus, John Gillin says that Christianity reinvented a new perspective of looking at begging. Gillin says,

> Thus, the religious basis of beggary had its roots deep in man's desire to free himself from sin by giving to a beggar, and on the other hand, got its justification from the desire to attain salvation by becoming a beggar. From both points of view, religion sanctified begging.[4]

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[3]David Fleming, SJ, *What is Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 2008), 62-63.

[4]Gillin, "Vagrancy and Begging," 426.

## Poverty in the Early Christian Church

In the apostolic times, the early Church would always go back to the teachings of Jesus and pattern their lives to his. Jesus, in most of his teachings, speaks about riches and possession and how these things hinder one from following him and eventually entering the kingdom of God. It should be noted, though, that what Jesus points out is not so much the material things in themselves but rather too much attachment to them. This attitude shifts one's attention, which should be directed to God, to oneself.

## Voluntary Poverty

Jesus lived out voluntary poverty, which he wanted to inculcate in his followers. Philip Mulhern, O.P. writes:

Jesus, who was poor by His own choice, asked the disciples to share his voluntary poverty. And when he sent his disciples preaching penance, He imposed on them the abandonment of all material resources. But he did not demand of all his followers and hearers to total renunciation, which he required of the chosen few.[5]

In this regard, Jesus' voluntary poverty made it possible for him to go to different places to perform healings and miracles; in short, to bring and proclaim God's kingdom on earth. One could surmise that Jesus also wanted his chosen disciples to emulate this. In a sense, letting go of one's material possessions and embracing voluntary poverty, while a test of faith, is also an essential element of true discipleship. It enables one to be more focused on one's mission while submitting oneself to Divine Providence.

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[5]Philip F. Mulhern, O.P., *Dedicated Poverty* (New York: Alba House, 1972), 29.

### *Imitatio Christi*

Voluntary poverty and asceticism sprung from the *Imitatio Christi* movement. This enterprise touches on the early Christians' idealism to recover and relive the ideals of Jesus. The *Imitatio Christi* phenomenon grew even more during the Middle Ages, particularly during the 12th and 13th centuries. Fueled by the crusades and the accounts and inspiration from the crusaders, a new consciousness of the human Jesus arose.[6] This shift was also fueled by the evident materialism of the persons in the hierarchy, which eventually caused abuses in the Church. Thus, in response, an evangelical revival took place in the 12th century, where the life of Jesus and his apostles were traced from the Gospels and held as the model on how medieval people should live out their faith. This new lifestyle in the 12th century ushered in a "new encounter between the Gospel and the world" in reference to Jesus's instruction to search the Scripture to become appropriate.[7]

Commonly known as *vita apostolica* or apostolic life, this lifestyle takes its main element from a passage in the Acts of the Apostles[8] that emphasizes renunciation of personal wealth, sharing with brethren, life in community, and preaching the message of personal salvation.[9] It is interesting to note that

[6]Ibid., 97.

[7]Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 19.

[8]Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35. The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.

[9]Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Longman Publishing, 2014), 192.

there is still an emphasis on voluntary poverty. This emphasis on voluntary poverty is supported by another scriptural passage, which is also said to be the foundation of *vita apostolica*: Luke 10:1-12. Here, there is a clear instruction from Jesus to his disciples to observe poverty as they go out on mission.[10]

## The Mendicant Orders

The mendicant orders were said to be a product of the pre-dominant idealism brought about by the *vita apostolica* movement. These groups were wandering from one place to the other to preach, often labeled as itinerant preachers, and their sustenance depended on the generosity of the people they ministered to. When closely examined, this was far different from the established monasteries centuries before this reform. While the latter are self-sufficient, the former opted to embrace voluntary poverty and beg. However, it should be noted that the foundation of these orders was not solely attributed to their founder but also to the pope's approval. They were seen with potentials that might play in mending the seemingly divided Church caused by groups spreading heresies.[11]

It was during his recuperation in Loyola that Ignatius would come across two books that would eventually change his vision in life: *Vita Christi* or the Life of Christ by Ludolph of Saxony and the book on the lives of saints entitled *The Golden Legend*, where he would encounter St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic Guzman. The ideals and conversion of both saints were also products of their own time.

According to Margaret Miles, St. Francis lived out a literal imitation of Christ and vowed poverty patterned after Christ,

[10]Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation*, 20.

[11]James M. Powell, "Mendicants, the Communes and the Law," in *Church History* 77:3 (2008): 557.

who was "poor as he lay in the crib, poor as he lived in the world, and naked on the cross." Regarding St. Francis' extreme poverty, Miles adds:

> Practicing severe asceticism and keeping his body at the point of death for many years at a time, he denied himself sleep, shelter, and food to such extremes that those of his followers with less robust physiques could not imitate him.[12]

For St. Francis of Assisi, poverty is an end in itself. In other words, one is encouraged to be one with the God whom we believe in, a God who in his infinite graciousness and love chose to live with us, to be with us, poor and naked.

On the other hand, St. Dominic Guzman, unlike St. Francis, who considered a life of poverty and begging as an end in itself, considered these two, poverty and begging, as a means to an end.[13] From here, it can be sensed that poverty and begging acquire another dimension, i.e., they can be means of evangelization and ways of proselytizing those outside the fold.

These two mendicants might have differences in their view of poverty and begging yet some things remain constant. By choosing and living out voluntary poverty, one is submitting himself to a benevolent and assuring God who calls him.

## Ignatius and Begging

It should be noted that Ignatius' conversion did not simply happen upon reading these books. Inspired by the austere life and simplicity of the holy men he read about, particularly St. Francis of Assisi, he would also end up radically changing

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[12]Margaret Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 160.

[13]Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 235.

his way of life. Ignatius would forego his status – nobility and chivalry – which received so much resistance and disapproval from his family. His brother Martin would try to dissuade him by reminding him of the "duties proper to family life."[14] Eventually, he would set his mind to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

This radical conversion would enter a new phase in Montserrat, where he holds his vigil-of-arms in the Benedictine monastery. Here, before the image of the Black Madonna, Ignatius would symbolically strip himself of the privileges of a nobleman and knight, and become a soldier of God by surrendering his sword and dagger before our Lady. This event made Ignatius value all the more "the deliberate practice of poverty as an effective way to grow in the love of the Lord."[15] Eventually, he exchanged his clothes with those of a beggar outside the monastery. However, Ignatius went to extremes. In Manresa, while begging, he also took his physical appearance for granted, letting his nails and hair grow long and engaging in severe penances. Ignatius saw bad habits that should be fixed and saw these externals as means to this end.[16]

In the succeeding years, according to his autobiography, Ignatius would uphold the importance of poverty in the following of Christ. Ignatius himself would become a beggar and lived like a beggar dependent on people's generosity. For instance, while studying for his master's studies in Paris, Ignatius struggled to support his matriculations, as documented in his letter

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[14]Barton Geger, SJ, ed., *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Massachusetts: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2011), 118.

[15]Mulhern, O.P., *Dedicated Poverty*, 146.

[16]P. Du Brul, SJ, *Ignatius: Sharing the Pilgrim Story, A Reading of the Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2003), 46.

to Agnes Pascual dated June 13, 1522. Here, Ignatius would mention several women who have pledged and have given him support. He would name La Sepilla, Mosen Gralla, Dona Isabel de Josa and Dona Alduncia de Cardona.[17]

The poor would become special to him, and at times, Ignatius would give some of his provisions to them and would eventually be a part of his ministry. According to David Knight, SJ, Ignatius' philosophy is easy, "the poor have no contacts, nor rich relatives, ordinarily, with whom to taste for a larger life." In this manner, he materializes what he envisions to be identified with the poor of this world.[18] Ignatius would eventually set up some ministries to take care of the poor. For instance, he established the House of St. Martha in Rome, dedicated to house women who "wished to escape the shame and sin of prostitution." Interestingly, it was Ignatius who first contributed financially so that the hospice could start its operation. He was convinced that the example of one giving could persuade others to be generous. Indeed, after some time, people began to offer financial support.[19] Here, one can surmise that begging by example took place.

It is also interesting to note that poverty for Ignatius does not only dwell in the realm of the abstract; it should be lived out. In the earliest version of the Constitutions of the Socieety of Jesus, Ignatius would point that Jesuits should not accept wages or income. He pointed out the common perspective that income or wages could lead to corruption. Besides, Ignatius

[17]William Young, SJ, *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), 12-13.

[18]David B. Knight, "Saint Ignatius' Ideal of Poverty," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1972): 26.

[19]John Patrick Donnelly, SJ, *Jesuit Writings of the Early Modern Period, 1540-1640* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 190-191.

stressed that first, the Society could make better use of their time by equipping themselves with the necessary things for their ministry. Second, they could give more of their time to service without any income. The Society's model for poverty is that of Jesus Christ, as he himself chose poverty. According to Ignatius and his nine first companions, they chose "to go forward under his banner, to preach and exhort, as is our profession."[20] Therefore, it can be asserted that just like the prominent figures who influenced Ignatius, the poverty of Christ takes a premium. However, it should be noted that by themselves alone, they can never practice it perfectly. A life of poverty is "related always to the help of divine grace." Thus, poverty was not the cause but the effect.[21]

## Begging and the Sacred Scriptures

Since the Sacred Scriptures is the soul of our Christian faith and an indispensable element of the Spiritual Exercises, it is deemed essential to also examine its teachings on begging and poverty. The *Spiritual Exercises,* as a manual, "helps the one giving the Exercises to guide other people in their experience of the mystery of Christ, God's saving revelation revealed in the Scriptures.[22] This reinforces the fact that what every Christian wanted to know about Jesus can be found in its entirety in the Gospels. With this, each scripture passage used in the *Exercises* served as a handle and door through which one, through the eyes of faith and the assistance of grace, is able to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more dearly, and to follow him closely.

[20]John Patrick Donnelly, SJ, *St. Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 71.

[21]Mulhern, O.P., *Dedicated Poverty*, 146.

[22]George A. Aschenbrenner, SJ, *Stretched for Greater Glory: What to Expect from the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 2004), 4.

## Begging in the Scriptures

### Old Testament: Poor Ones of God

The term "poor" in the Hebrew language can have literal and spiritual meanings. In the literal sense, several Hebrew terms can be used to denote poor, for instance, the adjective עָנִי (*ani*). It can mean a state of distress or lowliness in a more advanced use of the term. However, in the Pentateuch, it is used to describe the Levites, the foreigners, the widows, and orphans. In other words, those without any inheritance. The spiritual nuancing of the word "poor" has been introduced in the post-exilic period. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, there is a progression in terms of the usage of the word "poor." First, in Isaiah 3: 14-15, it is used to condemn the injustices committed towards the poor. In Isaiah 14:32, the "poor" will take refuge in Zion. However, the "poor" will also be used to signify a reversal, where the poor will triumph over their enemies. Towards the end of the book, the word "poor" would signify the chosen people after their exile, who now are the recipients of "divine compassion."[23] Thus, in the Old Testament, significant events contributed to the progression of their understanding of poverty and the "poor" from literal material insufficiency to an ideal disposition and identity as the chosen people. Eventually, the *anawim* will "form the religious nucleus of the nation."[24]

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[23]Bobby Worthington, "The Identity of the Poor in Luke 4:18, Jesus' Mission, and the Mission of the Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 19, no. 2 (Spring: 2022): 28.

[24]Albert Glin, *The Poor of Yahweh* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1964), 32.

## New Testament: The Poor Jesus

Reading the gospels, Christians would definitely agree that the "poor" had a special consideration in Jesus' ministry. In fact, he was so focused on them that it can be generalized that his ministry was to bring God's kingdom closer to them. In the New Testament, the Greek word πτωχός (*ptochos*), would be commonly used to refer to the "poor," appearing thirty-one times, while the other three Greek words would only appear once, like πένης (*penés*), πενιχρός (*penichros*) and πτωχεύω (*ptócheuó*).[25] Strikingly, these words can be interchangeably used for poor – both the materially poor and those with a low status in society, including beggars.

The gospel of Luke makes it clear that there are two faces of the "poor" that Jesus ministers to. Aside from the materially poor and helpless, it also considered poor who "irrespective of their socioeconomic condition humbly accept their wretchedness before God and decide to live in dependence to him"[26], i.e., those who are poor in spirit. In other words, those with material possessions and security are also beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry and healing and not just the materially poor.

However, it is interesting to note that in the gospel narratives, one observes that the poor manifest a notable disposition. Whenever the poor come to Jesus to seek help for healing or raising the dead, they call on the Lord with persistence and desperation. One can notice in these two qualities a semblance of begging: going out of one's comfort zone to look for another and seek help, often out of desperation or dire need. The setting

[25]Jey J. Kanagaraj, "The Poor in the Gospels and the Good News Proclaimed to Them," *Themelios,* 23, no. 1 (Oct. 1997): 45.

[26]Kanagaraj, "The Poor in the Gospels and the Good News Proclaimed to Them," 48.

would always be among the crowd, and they would raise their voice for Jesus to recognize them.

It is interesting to note how Jesus would respond to these people in need. Jesus would stop with sympathy, "communicate with the beggar" to ask, "What is it that you desire?" Jesus then would offer "a total transformation of the person from being handicapped to being able," making the person ready to reintegrate into the community.[27] Hence, while Jesus heeded the call of those who begged for his help and God's mercy, it should be noted that it is a form of empowerment for the "poor." Jesus brought back the dignity of these persons. Therefore, it can be said that Jesus did not advocate begging in the material sense.

## Begging and the *Spiritual Exercises*

Ignatius would use the Spanish word *pedir* in the earliest surviving codex of the Exercises.[28] In the basic sense of the word, *pedir* can be translated into English as to ask or to beg.[29] Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the Spanish lexicon, *pedir* is synonymous with the words *rogar*

[27]McGlory T. Speckman, "Beggars and gospel in Luke-Acts: Preliminary Observations on an Emerging Model in the Light of Recent Developmental Theories," *Neotestamentica*, *31 No. 2* (1997): 332.

[28]In celebration of the Ignatian Year, original important documents for the foundation of the Society were restored for the general public. This collection of documents includes the surviving hand written text of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* prepared in 1541. It can be accessed digitally through the *Archivum Romanum Societas Iesu* website. Cf. "Ignatian Texts Restored," *Archivum Romanum Societas Iesu*, accessed 29 August 2023, https://arsi.jesuits.global/en/digital-arsi/ignatian-texts-restored/.

[29]*Pedir* in *Diccionario Revisado Ingles-Espanol y Espanol-Ingles.* Furthermore, Mariano Velasquez' translation agrees to the translation of the word *pedir.* It can be translated as "to petition, to beg, to supplicate, to solicit.» Mariano Velasquez, *A New Pronouncing Dictionary of the Spanish and English Languages* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Company, 1948).

and *mendigar*, both meaning "to beg."[30] The word "*pedir*" typically precedes a specific grace within a particular prayer in the Exercises, resulting in the phrase "*pedir gracia*." Ignatius' manuscript includes this phrase during the general examination of conscience and the meditation on the two standards.

Contemporary translators of the Exercises offer their interpretations of the term "*pedir*" and its translations, including the concept of begging within the Spiritual Exercises. Notably, the word "beg" is present in the translations of three renowned Jesuits, George Ganss[31], David Fleming[32] , and Louis Puhl. It is intriguing that the word "beg" appears in SpEx 147, in the meditation on the two standards, particularly in the standard of Christ.[33] One can surmise that these three authors put a prime on this meditation in the Exercises. Indeed, this prayer needs so much grace to boldly follow the radical way and standard of Christ. However, in David Fleming's translation, begging also appears in SpEx 233, where one begs for an "intimate knowledge of all the sharing of goods which God does in his love for me."

[30]"pedir," accessed 30 August 2023, https://m.interglot.com/es/en/pedir.

[31]In Ganss' translation, begging is addressed to Our Lady. "I beg her to obtain for me grace from her Son and Lord that I may be received under his standard." George E. Ganns, SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: A Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 67.

[32]David Fleming writes that begging for the grace involves Mary, Christ and the Father. David L. Fleming, SJ. *Modern Spiritual Exercises: A Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image Books, 1983), 59.

[33]SpEx 147.

## Ignatius and Grace

Begging in the *Spiritual Exercises* involves an attitude of reliance on grace. Pavulraj Michael, SJ, writes that in his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius would refer to grace as the "total manifestation of the love of God." In addition, Michael, SJ, posits that this grace points to Christ – his "continuous activity," which does not simply mean giving graces and gifts, but "ultimately to give of himself."[34] Grace, then, is not simply a gift for Ignatius; it is a person – a person who is continuously and actively involved in each one's life. Through this ongoing revelation and giving of Himself, one could access the vast ocean offering of love.

Ignatius' concept of grace is inherently Thomistic, based on the theology of Thomas Aquinas. The medieval scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, which shaped and dominated the Christian framework, influenced him. In his famous work *De Veritate*, Thomas Aquinas defined grace as "God's very mercy itself by which he works from within the movements of the mind and ordains external affairs to one's salvation; in this sense, one cannot perform any good work without grace."[35] Here, grace is personal and uncreated in the sense that God is operative, bestowing himself on every believer; in other words, a God who is involved. Aquinas adds that this free gift "should have the effect of elevating the essence of the soul to a kind of divine being so as to be fit for divine operations."[36] In a sense, all that there is to the person are all his or her operations. While human nature is practically inclined to the Good and to do the

[34]Michael Pavulraj, SJ, "The dynamics of *demandar lo que quiero y deseo* in the key meditations of the Spiritual Exercises," *Gregorianum* 101, no 1 (2020): 75-76.

[35]*De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 14.

[36]Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 127.

good, it needs grace in order to grasp the divine and imitate the attributes of the divine – loving, forgiving.

Moreover, Thomas Aquinas also defines grace as something unmerited, a created gift that "perfects the essence of the soul." This perfection of the essence of the soul leads one to reflect on the wounds of sin in the Fall. That goodness that is innate in each person, born in God's image and likeness, was lost. Grace facilitates the recovery of this gift and identity. Simply put, grace allows healing to take place while at the same time empowers every Christian to actualize who he or she really is, a mastery of oneself.

When the Ignatian and Thomistic notions of grace are juxtaposed in the context of the *Spiritual Exercises*, one sees first and foremost that *grace* is *God* – the source and the gift Himself. The fourth point in Contemplation to Attain Love in the Fourth Week of the *Exercises* succinctly sums it up when Ignatius wrote that "my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above," like "the rays of light descend from the sun and as the waters flow from their fountains."[37]

Second, while grace is a gift, it necessitates intentionality, particularly on the part of the *exercitants,* to enter into the saving mystery of the life of Jesus Christ. That is why it is deemed important that the exercitant must have a clear conviction and realistic disposition to the demands of the reality of the sacred that they are venturing into. George Ganns, SJ, writes that the Exercises is for "willing and eager *exercitants*."[38]

In sum, grace is an indispensable element of Ignatian spirituality, particularly of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The Ignatian concept of grace is not devoid of influences, as Ignatius

[37]*The Spiritual Exercises* 237.

[38]Ganns, SJ, "The Authentic Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius," 7.

subscribes to the Thomistic tradition. Begging for the specific graces in particular meditations and contemplations facilitates the encounter with God, proper to each week of the *Exercises.* Moreover, it helps the exercitants enter into Christ's mysteries, which will help them to follow, love, and eventually serve Him in return.

## Theology of Begging in *The Spiritual Exercises*

The foregoing historical information shows that the theology of begging in the *Spiritual Exercises* is a product of its time – both in *theology* and *spirituality*. Theologically speaking, begging in the Spiritual Exercises involves an attitude of reliance on grace. Ignatius' concept of grace is inherently Thomistic. From this scholastic theological point of view, "grace perfects the essence of the soul,"[39] i.e., grace bestows on the soul the necessary handles to reach its fullest and ultimate potential, which is to commune with God. While the human soul has the natural inclination for God, it needs grace to make it all the more possible to recognize and communicate with God. Hence, when one looks closely, this Thomistic concept of grace magnifies the necessity of grace in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In its practice, the *exercitants* beg for a specific grace for a particular week following the progressive movement of the *Exercises*. Begging for these forms of grace allows one to enter into the heart of the retreat, making a fruitful encounter with the Lord possible. These graces do not simply facilitate an encounter and renewal; instead, these graces are God himself. It is as if one is begging God to be proximate and allow us to get near Him. Therefore, these kinds of grace asked are not just means but should be considered as a person one encounters.

[39]Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 127.

Furthermore, begging for grace would also denote intentionality, the desire *for* and *of* God. From the anthropological perspective, we have seen that beggars do this act out of dire need. Hesitation and failure to beg will lead to their physical destitution and eventual demise. When applied to the *Spiritual Exercises*, the *exercitants* are led to consider the fundamental reality of dependence on God that is the mark of our creaturehood. In other words, the human being is a beggar before God.[40] Hence, it entails intentionality on the part of the *exercitant*, not just to ask but to beg with all of his might to be near God. Begging for grace is the manifestation of our intrinsic need and dependence on God. It is also interesting to note that this can also be an acknowledgment that even prayer is a gift from God.

On another note, begging for grace in the *Spiritual Exercises* could also denote that it is a form of *agere contra,* a going against the natural tendency to stay in one's comfort zone, maintain the status quo, and control things. It seeks to debunk the idea that humans can do everything solely on their own. It challenges the *exercitants* to go out of their ordinary disposition and look at prayer as God's work: without Him initiating, prayer would not be possible.

Furthermore, *Devotio Moderna* was the trending spirituality during Ignatius' milieu. Aside from being considered a community, it was also considered a renewal movement which sought to "inflame the affect in order to achieve the heartfelt understanding required for true communion with the divine through prayer.[41] This was the breakthrough in spirituality that influenced Ignatius of Loyola. The whole of the *Exercises* is

[40]St. Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6, 9: PL 38, 381

[41]Ulrike Hascher-Burger and Hermina Joldersma, "Introduction: Music and the Devotio Moderna," *Church History and Religious Culture* 88, no. 3 (2008): 314-315.

not just a cerebral function. On a larger scale, it involved the imagination and the heart or the affect in order to enter fully into the experience of the contemplation, that is, entering into the world of Jesus. This is found in the Fifth Contemplation of the *Spiritual Exercises,* which speaks of applying the five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – so as to "draw some fruits."[42] This application of the senses will significantly help the key contemplations of the life of Jesus in the *Exercises*, starting from the nativity to the resurrection. Entering this kind of contemplation will bear much fruit on the part of the *exercitant.* However, it remains a grace that needs to be begged for.

When these two notable influences – spirituality and theology – are juxtaposed, one can infer that the word "desire" can summarize the theology of begging, a *holy desire*. It is the desire *for God* and eventually, desiring to be with God. The specific grace begged for during the Second Week of the *Exercises*, particularly conveyed in the contemplation on the Incarnation, sums it up: to have "an intimate knowledge of the Lord, to love him more intensely, so as to follow Him more closely."[43] Begging in the *Spiritual Exercises* encompasses the exercitant's life from thenceforth: it does not end in the experience of the long retreat but goes beyond and continues as the *exercitants* return to their own particular realities of day-to-day life. It is good as saying that it is not a desire simply for oneself, but a desire that fuels generosity to serve.

[42]SpEx 121-125.

[43]SpEx 104. This grace is begged particularly in the Second Week of the Exercises, particularly in the Contemplation on the Incarnation.

## SpEx 104: The Ultimate Desires of the *Spiritual Exercises*

### The Desire *for* God
### *For an intimate knowledge of the Lord*

Given the scripture passages that Ignatius incorporates in the *Spiritual Exercises*, one should ultimately be led to an intimate knowledge of the Lord. The modifier "intimate" would denote knowledge beyond the conceptual and dogmatic God taught in catechesis and theology. This intimate knowledge of God is only possible through a close and personal encounter. In a sense, begging here would denote one's utmost desire to enter into a more intimate relationship with Him. In fact, the whole of the *Exercises* is a continuous process of getting to know God and letting ourselves be known by Him. Throughout the *Exercises*, we have been enabled to enter into the heart of God and unravel His ultimate desire for humanity: to call us to Himself. Indeed, without communication, no knowledge of a thing or a person can take place. When applied to our context, it is in the mediated self-communication with God that humanity can grasp who He truly is.

Moreover, we can say that before we even 'desired' an intimate knowledge of the Lord, it was He who 'desired' us first. He willed "that men should have access to the Father, through Christ the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature".[44] Humans, who have the capacity for God, became the recipient of this revelation – of who He truly is and what He desires for us. We are not made out of sheer coincidence, nor out of any need, but out of freedom and the gratuitous love of God. Pope Benedict XVI beautifully captured this thought during his inaugural address in 2005 when he

[44]Ephesians 1:9; 2-18; Peter 1:4

said, "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."[45] Since we are created in His image and likeness[46], there is an innate goodness in each of us, a capacity to know God and the capacity to love. Hence, we can surmise that this desire to desire about God does not simply end in getting to know God; rather, it reveals our true identity to us. More than a creator, He is a person who desires to be in an intimate relationship with us, and so must we.

## The Desire *for* God to love him more intensely

Indeed, when one has finally resolved to enter into a relationship with God, one ought to maintain it. However, our own particular context, including our wounds, makes this desire to love God even more difficult. Loving God involves a process of freeing oneself from what hinders the relationship. Some inordinate attachments could come our way, which can be an attitude or material possessions. One of the *Spiritual Exercises*› main goals is ordering these attachments to live the life for which we are created.

Therefore, this love of God does not come overnight. It is a continuous process of knowing God on a more personal level. However, more than our effort, developing that intimate loving relationship with God involves the community since "our personal faith in Christ is supported and intensified by

[45]Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily during the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate*, Homilies, accessed 8 February 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

[46]Genesis 1:26

our fellow members".[47] Thus, a communitarian aspect to this desired grace will link us to the third grace of SpEx 104. More than these, we realize that along the process, in everything we do, we do not do it to gain that love, but rather, our act of faith is a response to that love continually bestowed upon us.

In all of these, this desire for God is not simply about our own human effort; it is, first and foremost, a grace, a gift that only God can give. Faith, our apt response to this gift, is further developed and nurtured by the sacraments. Through the Church, the Spirit continues to animate us through the sacraments. Through the liturgy, "especially in the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us."[48] Through these outpourings of the Spirit, dispensed through the Church, we receive the necessary graces to strengthen the relationship so that we may love Him fully in return.

## To Desire to be *with* God, *to follow Him more closely*

The *Spiritual Exercises* further aim to give us handles to love as we ourselves have experienced love. Basically, to follow God closely is to desire what God desires. In a sense, this desire is the most pastoral and apostolic way, as we are aligning ourselves with how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, acted. While we have our own desires, we allow ourselves to be led and aligned with the desires of the Christ of the *Exercises* – a friend of the poor, defender of the oppressed, and the voice of the neglected. We take the lead from the Head, who became poor, to bring God closer to the poor.

Inducted as members of the mystical body of Christ in baptism, we are made sharers in the divine life of the Triune

[47] *Catechism for Filipino Catholics,* 151.

[48] *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* 10.

God, as well as in their mission. This denotes that we are relational; we are made not just for ourselves but also for others. Humans have the capacity for a relationship of love and mutual self-giving. Thus, we are urged to go out of ourselves and relate with our fellow humans as a reflection of being fashioned in the image and likeness of God. Only then can one follow the Lord more closely. Therefore, "to follow him more closely" is never a personal endeavor but rather a communal one.

Hence, the whole of the *Exercises* is a progression. It is a movement that starts with a desire to know and be known by God and eventually moves on to an intimate relationship with Him. It continues to a sending-off, particularly in the Fourth Week of the *Exercises* which gives us the assurance to continue the mission God has started. The experience of the *Exercises* does not just simply end in feeling good about God and ourselves. Instead, it involves a literal going out of the self to actualize and share the gifts of being found, known, forgiven, loved, and empowered by God.

## Appropriation to the Priestly Vocation

I have realized how my experience of begging for grace in the *Spiritual Exercises* benefited my seminary formation. More than deepening my faith, the *Spiritual Exercises* allowed me to discover who I am in relation to God and the vocation He has called me to. When juxtaposed with theological studies and faith life, the movement of the *Spiritual Exercises* proceeds from an intimate knowledge of the Lord to loving Him and eventually following Him, not only in His grace-filled ministry but even up to His passion and death. Moreover, this three-fold activity is confirmed in His resurrection.

Herein lies the wisdom of why seminary formation should be integral and holistic and how time is of the essence. In between

periods of formation are episodes of begging for graces. Different pillars of formation are employed to form someone for the ministry properly. One cannot just be intellectually competent but should also have the capacity to relate with others. Consequently, pastoral formation does not just mean having social skills. Instead, the craft could be an excellent avenue for catechesis and evangelization. Holistic seminary formation implies that one must have an "intimate knowledge of the Lord" through prayer and studies so that he can "love him intensely" and "follow Him more closely," as translated in community life and the apostolate. In the updated *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis,* the Congregation for the Clergy posits:

> Far from being confined solely to the field of knowledge or being understood solely as a means of acquiring more information in the various disciplines, intellectual formation helps priests to listen profoundly to the Word, and also to the ecclesial community in order to learn how to read the signs of the times.[49]

Begging for grace, particularly in SpEx 104, should be done not only during the seminary formation but should continue into the priestly ministry and for one's entire lifetime. Begging for this grace is also a good reminder that our chosen life is not about ourselves but centered on God and others, a movement from the inside to the outside. A much deeper reflection should further lead us to the realization that anyone can beg for this grace. After all, we are all called to holiness.

## Conclusion

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius presents us a God of desire and providence. He is a God of desire who wishes that we, too, should desire Him. However, to desire Him is a grace we must beg

[49]*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis,* 117.

from Him. One would not dare to beg if there were no assurances from a provident God. Therefore, more than just making us realize our contingency and dependence, the theology of begging in the *Spiritual Exercises* makes us realize how God has been gracious and reassuring since the beginning. At the same time, begging reflects how ardent we are in our desire to have a deeper relationship with Him.

# UNDERSTANDING THE *BACI-SOUKHWAN* RITUAL: A STEP TOWARDS INCULTURATION IN THE LAO CATHOLIC CHURCH

*Thang Le Dac, SJ*

## Introduction

Three different experiences led me to have a particular interest in the *Baci-Soukhwan*[1] ritual in Laos. First of all, like many other outsiders, I usually associate Laos with Buddhism. In fact, many non-native observers of the Lao culture say, "to be Lao is to be a Buddhist." However, it would be a mistake to associate any culture with a single religion only. Religion is contextualized in a culture, not the other way around.

For most Lao people, including Catholics, the core of any important celebration is the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. This unique traditional practice made a deep impression on me when I stayed there during my two years of pastoral work. That is the second reason why I became interested in it and decided to write about the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

[1]Lao people generally use the terms *Baci, Soukhwan, Phukkhen, Makkhen* as interchangeable terms for a kind of *khwan* ritual. In my opinion, *Phukkhen* and *Makkhen* are basically named after the action of tying one's wrist [with cotton strings] in the ritual. Therefore, in this study, I use the general term *Baci-Soukhwan* for this wrist-tying ritual with the cotton threads. Regarding the transliteration in this study, the Pali and Sanskrit transliterations herein are conventional, except that I have not used diacritics. While quoting others in this study, I have changed their own romanization schemes into a unified transliteration so that there will not be variants of the same term.

The third experience is the disagreement among missionaries due to the controversy regarding the practice of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual in the Lao Catholic Church. Up to now, there are no official guidelines from the Church about this ritual. Nevertheless, the faithful in Laos practice it without being critically concerned whether or not it is compatible with the Catholic faith. The issue of inculturation is raised only among foreign missionaries who are more open-minded about local ritual practices.

I tend to agree with Paul Hiebert who says that trying to understand folk religions "does not mean we believe them to be true or biblical in nature. It does mean we must take them seriously and provide better answers if we want the old ways to die out."[2] Nonetheless, I, in no way, want this ritual to be wiped out for the sake of Christianity. On the contrary, as a Catholic missionary, I sincerely wish to understand it first as an anthropological phenomenon and then see how it is compatible with the Christian faith. In terms of inculturation, this is the first step in approaching a local practice of a traditional culture.

In this article, we will explain and analyze the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual before focusing on its inculturation. This study is an attempt towards a Christian understanding of the ritual and to propose theological principles for its liturgical inculturation.

## The Explanation of *Khwan* and *Baci-Soukhwan*

### Khwan and the Well-Being of a Person

There is an ancient belief which survives among the people of Laos that in every person either old or young, there is a *khwan*. *Khwan* is likely to roam around freely that it must be kept or recalled home as often as possible since it is liable to haunt

[2]Ibid., 10.

unwholesome places or be led astray by evil companions.[3] It can leave the body temporarily during sleep and illness and permanently at the time of death. Without a *khwan*, a person would not be complete.[4]

According to tradition, a person can have as many as thirty-two *khwans*, located in various parts of the body. However, the number of *khwan* that a person is believed to possess varies from group to group. It is possible that the concept of having thirty-two *khwans* is a later development due to the influence of Buddhism where there are enumerated thirty-two integral parts of a human body.[5] In rituals, these *khwans* are often identified with the body's various senses and faculties, though not all the *khwans* are necessarily named. The numerous specific *khwans* are also collectively termed *khwan*.[6]

The folk category of the person significantly identifies the distinction between the body (*tua*) and *khwan*, and their unstable relationship. Accordingly, the individual subject consists of the body and *khwan*, maintaining an ever unstable equilibrium exposed and susceptible to external powers, often represented as spirits (*phi*). Consequently, *khwan* is not spirit (*phi*), but it shapes one's relations with the plural spirits.[7] The Lao people

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[3]Thao Nhouy Abhay, "The Baci," in *Kingdom of Laos: The Land of the Million Elephants and of the White Parasol*, ed. by Rene de Berval (Saigon: France-Asie, 2021), 129.

[4]Ruth-Inge Heinze, "Nature and Function of Some Therapeutic Techniques in Thailand," *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1977): 92, doi:10.2307/1177819.

[5]Rajadhon, ibid., 234.

[6]A. Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1977): 253, www.jstor.org/stable/205372.

[7]Sarinda Singh, "Religious Resurgence, Authoritarianism, and 'Ritual Governance': 'Baci' Rituals, Village Meetings, and the Developmental State in Rural Laos," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73, no. 4, (2014): 1063, www.jstor.org/stable/43553469.

believe that *khwan* remains with people for as long as they have good health, vigor and strength, and are comfortable with themselves and their environment. When the *khwan* leaves the body, the person will be ill or experience some ill effects. When the *khwan* is frightened, it will take flight into the wilderness and will not come back until it has regained its normal self.[8]

## The Baci-Soukhwan Ritual

*Baci* is a ritual to call back, welcome, propitiate and unite the *khwan* with the physical body. The two Lao terms *"baci"* and *"soukhwan"* denote the same ceremony, with the latter being more common and colloquial while the former is more pompous and has connotations of royalty. *Baci* is a term that especially denotes a *Soukhwan* ritual, which is held for the Buddhist monks. In general, Baci is a special kind of *Soukhwan* ritual.[9] In fact, many publications dealing with the subject also conflate these two terms.[10]

Three elements are crucial in the performance of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual: the phakhwan, the morphorn with the invocation, and the sacred cotton thread for the *phukkhene*.

The first element is the *phakhwan*. The *phakhwan* is a tray constructed with bamboo and rattan roughly thirty centimeters high. In everyday use, it is the family dining table, but during a *khwan* ritual, all the offerings, gifts, candles, and flowers used to attract the *khwan* are placed on it. It serves as

[8]Rajadhon, ibid.,120.

[9]Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, "Individual Soul, National Identity: The 'Baci-Sou Khuan' of the Lao," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 5, no. 2 (1990): 292-3, www.jstor.org/stable/41056801.

[10]Phoumirath, ibid.

the central point of reference during the ritual, with everyone in attendance seated around it on the floor.[11]

The second element is the *phaiphukkhene*. The *phaiphukkhene* literally refers to the cotton threads tied on someone's wrist to symbolize the unity of the *khwan* and the body. Usually, the threads should already be blessed by either a monk in a religious ceremony or by a *morphorn* at the *Baci-Soukhwan* ceremony.

The third element is the *morphorn*, together with the invocation of *khwan*. The *Baci-Soukhwan* is conducted by a ritual specialist or an elder who is usually well-versed in Pali or knows the appropriate ritual texts or formulae which are often in a mixture of Pali and Lao. The ritual specialist, who usually wears a white garb or at least a white scarf, is generally known as *morkhwan* or *morphorn*.

## *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual Performance

In the book Kingdom of Laos, Thao Nhouy Abhay describes the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as follows. The first step is to choose an auspicious day and hour for celebration of the ritual. It is said that to hold a *khwan* ritual, the elders, parents, relatives, and friends must be present. The candles and incense sticks are lit and thus a light mist of perfume and incense arises to enfold the ritual setting. The *morphorn* then begins a series of prayers to invoke the divinities:

> Today is a propitious day [...]
> You, the divinities of the mountains and the rivers,
> be favorable to us;
> Listen, all of you;

[11]Stephen K. Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness Among the Lowland Lao Informed by Worldview Themes in Khwan Rituals" (PhD diss., School of World Mission, May 2002), 223.

Silent ones, lend a kindly ear to the invitation which
I send you;
Come and gather the gifts offered to you on this day.[12]

At the end of this first prayer, the *khwan* is invited to the *phakhwan* with its gifts. As this is done, everyone near enough touches the *phakhwan* with their right hand. Those who are not so close to the *phakhwan* can touch the back of the one in front of them. The transition between the first and second phases of the ritual is marked by the congregation saying in unison with the *morphorn*, "Come *khwan*, come!"13

The second prayer is, therefore, an invocation to call the *khwan* back. It includes the call to the *khwan* to return from the various places to which it has wandered. The *morphorn* appeals to the *khwan* to return to its owner. As this prayer ends, the congregation again recites the transition phrase in unison.

This is a very propitious day [...]
This is the day we have chosen to put on this tray
hard-boiled eggs, sweet potatoes...
Come home [...].[14]

The third prayer invites the *khwan* to the *phakhwan* for the feast. The arrival of the *khwan* is marked by women who sit in the back of the congregation and toss uncooked rice into the air. The rice is thrown to encourage the *khwan* to enter the house, as it might be standing in the doorway, hesitating shyly as it observes the situation. The prayer continues:

Do not fear when you come near [...]
Come, oh *khwan* [...]
Come back to this home [...]

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[12]Abhay, "The Baci," 129-130.

[13]Bailey, "Communication Strategies," 208ff.

[14]Abhay, "The Baci," 130.

> Come back, take your place before the *Phakhwan* and henceforth stay with us.[15]

At the end of this prayer, the *morphorn* takes some of the offerings (typically an egg, a banana, and some cooked rice) and places them in the recipient's hand. Meanwhile, the recipient sits passively with her left hand upright in a prayer position. The recipient acknowledges the blessing when the *morphorn* finishes by raising both hands together in the prayer position to her forehead. Once these incantations and prayers have been said, it is believed that the divinities are presiding over the ceremony and that all the souls have gone back into the body. The "wishes formula" is then recited.

> Be as strong as the antlers of a stag [...]
> May your life last a thousand years [...]
> Should you suffer with fever, may it disappear! [...]
> May you be all-powerful the world over!
> May everything yield before you and let you be free from want!
> Have a long life, good health, happiness, and strength.[16]

The audience, which had remained silent and with palms together at the forehead, now expresses its assent by murmuring: *sa!* Then, the oldest or most respected among the participants begins the *phukkhene* (or more commonly called *makkhen*), which is the tying of the cotton threads around the wrist of the *morphorn*. The participants grasp the knot of the thread with his thumb and forefinger, twisting it as they intone a wish for good fortune, good health, and longevity for the *morphorn*. Then the *morphorn*, in turn, ties unspun cotton threads around the wrist of the person for whom the *soukhwan* is performed. When the *morphorn* has finished tying the threads around the recipient's wrists, the relatives and friends do the same. The

[15]Ibid., 130-131.

[16]Ibid., 131.

consecrated threads are tied onto the recipient's wrist with an oral blessing spoken by the one tying, thus tying the words of blessing and the *khwan* to the person at the same time.[17]

## Individual, Social and Cultural-Religious Spheres in the *Baci-Soukhwan*

During the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, three spheres – the individual-psychological, the social, and the cultural-religious – are intimately connected so that the curative efforts have religious aspects.[18] As for the individual-psychological aspect, the destructive effects on the unity of body and soul are best seen in cases of a violent attack by various spirits such as forest spirit (*phipa*), witch-spirit (*phika*), and "bad death" spirit (*phitaihong*).[19] Regarding its social aspect, the community is also bonded through a heightened sense of solidarity in the Baci-Soukhwan ritual. Lao people often say that no matter what you have or do not have, to do a khwan ritual properly, you must at least have the presence of the village community. In terms of its cultural-religious dimension, the concept of khwan does not only "objectify" certain psychological features, specifically the psychological balance or equilibrium of the individual, but also "spiritualizes" those characteristics.

## Restoration of Harmony and Integration in the *Baci-Soukhwan*

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is held whenever the totality of the physical, spiritual, and psychological person needs to be protected, blessed or restored to the status quo. Psychologically, the *Baci-Soukhwan* re-establishes the psychological equilibrium

[17]Ngaosyvathn, "Individual Soul, National Identity," 297.

[18]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 91.

[19]Olivier Evrard, et al., *Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 77.

of the individual and provides her/him with its therapeutic value. Socially, the ritual is an occasion for social acceptance and respect for the individual and an expression of kinship. Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* is a ritual of recalling, welcoming, propitiating, and biding the *khwan* to return to the physical body of the person for whom it is performed in order to re-establish psychological equilibrium and strengthen the spiritual well-being of the person while making a cultural, social and political statement about the person's position vis-à-vis their worldly surrounding.[20] The "making" or "strengthening of the *khwan*" in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual operates on several levels simultaneously:21

(1) The psychological balance of the individual. It is meant to keep the *khwan* inside the recipient's body and to strengthen their essence of life. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and their psyche.

(2) The presence of those close to the candidate offers the reassurance of society. By means of this, harmony is restored between the individual and their society and the recipient assured of the care and goodwill of those close to her/him by means of a socially sanctioned rite.

(3) The supernatural forces of deities are invited and propitiated, and their promise is made binding. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and the supernatural. On the one hand, it protects the recipient against the evil forces from the outside. On the other hand, it seals a contract between the individual and the supernatural.

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[20]Thongrith Phoumirath, "The Soukhouane and The Lao People," *LaoPress*, 2020, accessed July 5, 2021, www.laopress.com/news/custom/soukhouane/index.htm.

[21]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 96.

(4) In the microcosmic reenactment of a higher reality, all artifacts are charged with symbolic meanings and serve to reinforce the ceremony's efficacy. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and the cosmos.

Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* touches the individual's psychological, the social, and the cultural and religious spheres where religion represents the ultimate values of a society and has important integrative functions.[22]

## The Baci-Soukhwan Ritual and Christian Faith

Both the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual and the Christian faith share an analogous theological quest of the Absolute, an anthropological quest of the meaning of being human, and an existential quest about the meaning of life.

### The Theological Quest: "Is there the Absolute – God?"

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual tacitly asserts that our world is more spiritual than physical and material. People see themselves engaged in constant struggle with spirits, fellow humans, and supernatural and natural forces that confront them. In such a world, everything can be explained in terms of competing powers and power-encounters where the stronger dominate the weaker. There are no accidents.[23]

The people involved in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual have a concept of various groups of deities (lower than the Supreme Being) that inhabit the immediate human environment. They are believed to dwell in the rivers, lakes, rocks, or other spiritual phenomena. These spirits have powers superior to

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., 85.

humans and are asked to intercede with the Supreme God on behalf of the living. At the same time, they are also believed to have the power to harrass the living if they are displeased.

Regarding the belief in the Supreme God, Opoku-Boateng explains that since God is unapproachable without intermediaries, people call upon these lesser gods to take care of the mundane affairs of life.[24] According to the author's observation when he lived in Laos, the Lao people always mention God (*phachao*) in their wishes or blessings. However, tn the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, even God (*phachao*) is not called out in the prayer of the *morphorn*, but the participants still address God in their words of blessing when they tie the strings around one another's wrists. The God (*phachao*) that people of other faiths in Laos call out can be identified with the God of the Christian faith in the sense that this God is the highest among all beings. Analogously, the lifegiving and propitious deities that *morphorn* invoke in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual can be considered as specific and localized personifications of God's sustaining power. However, God's loving care for the universe is transcendental and cannot merely be confined to or conflated with the physical beings like how the Lao people understand spiritual deities in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

## The Anthropological Quest: "What does it mean to be human?"

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual implies that each subject consists of the body and *khwan.* Therefore, *khwan* is understood as a spiritual entity residing in a person's physical body. It is worth noting that the body and *khwan* are in a constant relationship. For as long as a person's *khwan* is present, they enjoy good

[24]Daniel Opoku-Boateng, "Animistic World View and the Search for Truth in the Christian Classroom: Towards a Holistic Approach," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, 2 (1997): 100.

health and happiness and the *khwan* offers the person dignity and wholeness.

There is no exact or equivalent term for *khwan* in the Christian faith. "*Khwan*" is easily mistaken as "soul" because these two terms are quite similar. Both of them are the principle of life. There are Christian dualistic anthropologies that locate the image of God (*imago Dei*) exclusively with reference to the spiritual aspect of human nature. However, the *imago Dei* speaks of humanity as a whole. In order to maintain the unity of body and soul clearly taught in revelation, the Magisterium adopted the definition of the human soul as *forma substantialis*. In this regard, the Magisterium relied on Thomistic anthropology, which, drawing upon the philosophy of Aristotle, understands body and soul as the material and spiritual principles of a single human being. If the soul, created in God's image, forms matter to constitute the human body, then the human person as a whole is the bearer of the divine image in a spiritual as well as a bodily dimension.[25] In other words, we cannot deal with the soul in isolation from the body like what we do with *khwan.* A significant difference between *khwan* and soul is that while the former is likely to leave the human body, the latter departs from the human body only at the moment of death. Moreover, aside from human beings, certain kinds of plants and animals are also believed to have *khwan*. On the contrary, only humans are posited have an immortal soul that has its own existence apart from the body in the Catholic worldview.

[25]International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," *Vatican* (2004), accessed July 5, 2021, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html, no. 31.

## The Historical Quest: "What is the meaning of human life?"

According to Hiebert, humans – the ancestors, the living, and the unborn – are seen as actors in the universe and as the center of existence.[26] The common life that they share as a family, a lineage or clan, and society must be preserved by supplicating, coercing, or bribing the surrounding gods and the powerful but capricious spirits. These gods and spirits share the same vital force and are significant, not in their own right, but because of their involvement in the lives of human beings.[27] The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual deals primarily with existential questions – questions about here and now, and with the living, not the dead. The primary concerns are birth, diseases, promotions, money problems, jobs, marriage, new ventures, etc. People find security in their kinship groups, joy in their community gatherings, and resilience in their sacred rituals. They turn to the ancestors and the gods for help in rituals in order to protect them from surrounding dangers.[28]

The cosmological view underpinning the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual views everything in this world as interconnected. Because most life events are explained in relational terms, people spend much of their time trying to appease and coerce the gods, spirits, ancestors, and other people with offerings and bribes to gain their help and assuage their anger. This is the very purpose of performance of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. In contrast, Christian cosmology is God-centered. According to the Christian faith, God governs creation as a loving *Abba*, making all things work for the good of all his creatures. Therefore, Christians experience the everyday trials of human life as associated with following and serving God. Instead of

[26]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 80.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid., 87.

being paralyzed by fear or driven about by anxiety, strong believers stand on the promise and experience of divine providence and move forward in firm obedience and submission to God's will.

## Theological Principles for the Liturgical Inculturation in the *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual

### A Theology of the Triune God

Since the Trinitarian principle is undoubtedly the foundation of the Christian faith, so it must be for the liturgical inculturation of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. Thus, the handbook used in the Lao Catholic Church for the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual also conforms to the theology of the Triune God. Accordingly, the ritual always begins with the sign of the cross and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The presider starts the prayers by calling for the Holy Spirit, *"Come Holy Spirit,"* and then the congregation follows:

> Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.
>
> O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.[29]

Before the presider says the blessings for the recipient, the congregation recites one "Our Father", one "Hail Mary", one "Glory be". This formula of the Catholic *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is flexible and may be adapted to specific circumstances.

[29]The handbook of conducting the *Baci-Soukhwan* in the Lao Catholic Church (unpublished documents).

However, the God that the Lao Catholics address in the ritual must always be the Triune God.

## A Theology of Worship and Submission

In the liturgy, the Church acts not only in virtue of the commission given to her by Christ but also "in closest union with Him her Head," and through His mediation who is the one and universal mediator standing before the Father to intercede for us. Thus, the liturgy empowers us to act in the name of Christ, not by mere imputation, but enabling us to become His true mouthpiece or instrument to join His members to His eternal mediation before the Father.[30] Such a theology of worship is closely connected with the theology of submission.

In the book *Understanding the Folk Religion*, Hiebert remarks that people make sacrifices to gods and spirits to bargain for healing and prosperity. They turn to their honorable ancestors and divination in an attempt to control and assure their own well-being.[31] We can notice such intentionality in the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as follows. The offerings are intended to attract and feed the spirits (*phi*). The tying of string is to keep *khwan* within a person. Following this logic, some Lao Catholics may be in the same disposition whenever they hold a *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

Nevertheless, the theology of submission steadfastly rejects an ego-centered religion and a magical mentality. The center of its message is God and what God does. In the Christian context, the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual must not be done with the ulterior motive of having to prove the practitioner's piety or winning God's favor or approval. God is not to be manipulated by human

[30]John H. Miller, "The Nature and Definition of the Liturgy," *Theological Studies*, 18, no. 3, Sept. (1957): 338, doi:10.1177/004056395701800301.

[31]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 371.

rituals and sacrifices. Instead, people should conduct rituals with an attitude of worship and submission to God.

## A Theology of Ecology

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual embraces a cosmological view where everything in this world is interconnected. It espouses a theology of ecology with two prominent aspects: relatedness and equilibrium. Such a viewpoint, however, appears to lack a holistic theology.

As for relatedness, human beings are related to the rest of the living world, including other-than-human entities and larger-than-human communities. In the article *Indigenous Nature Reverence and Conservation*, Jeffrey G. Snodgrass states that in the context of an indigenous interconnected cosmos, the term environment denotes an eco-social sphere of a "community-of-beings", where human and non-human entities co-exist and interact on a daily basis.[32] In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the first prayer that the *morphorn* offers is to invoke the divinities who are believed to dwell in natural objects like mountains, rivers, the air, etc. Similarly, the *khwan* of the recipient in a *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is believed to have left his or her body and begun to stay elsewhere such as in natural objects like rivers, trees, ricefield, huts... This is why in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the *morphorn* must offer a prayer to call *khwan* back from those temporary dwelling places.

The other aspect of a theology of ecology in the *Baci-Soukhwan* is that it expresses and fosters equilibrium among all creatures. As mentioned previously, Heinze explains that during the ritual, the three spheres –individual-psychological,

[32]Jeffrey Snodgrass and Kristina Tiedje, "Indigenous Nature Reverence and Conservation: Seven Ways of Transcending an Unnecessary Dichotomy," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 9, https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v2i1.6.

the social, and the cultural-religious – are intimately connected so that the curative efforts have religious aspects.[33] Roger Gottlieb confirms that the relationship of health with ourselves, our community and with all creation is a spiritual relationship. The need of the universe is the individual need to be in harmony with the creator and other creatures.[34] In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the equilibrium between humans and all other creatures is also implied in the prayer for calling *khwan* back. Accordingly, the *morphorn* functions primarily as an intermediary between human and nonhuman worlds who summon *khwan* back from where it is wandering around, and only secondarily as a healer who restores the *khwan*-body harmony in the recipient of the ritual. Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is supposed to be "home" for *khwan* to come back. Such a home, then, must be something "better" than the places to which *khwan* has wandered. Hence, this home must be characterized by the harmony between good natural things (forest woods, elephants...), well-behaved humans (uncles, parents...) and *Phakhwan* (with the offerings made of natural material like rice, flowers, fruits, banana leaves...). In general, the theology of ecology expressed in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual recognizes the value of all creatures and emphasizes a harmonious connectedness between humans and all creatures.

The Second Vatican Council affirms such an ecological perspective in saying that "The faithful must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, as well as its role in the harmonious praise of God."[35] As envisioned in *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonia*, the Lao indigenous communities "care for ecosystems and they recognize that the earth, while serving as

[33]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 91.

[34]Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 161.

[35]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 36.

a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love."[36] However, a holistic Christian theology of ecology entails that this interconnectedness be expressed in solidarity with others, "that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others."[37] Moreover a holistic theology of ecology presupposes that an interconnected world, as stated in *Laudato Si'* must always include an eschatological vision in that "creation is projected towards divinization, towards unification with the Creator himself."[38]

## A Theology of the Kingdom of God

Similar to holistic theology, this theological principle of the Kingdom of God acknowledges God's rule and work in the world. In ritual, time and space become holy. Through ritual, water, wine, and bread become means to understand and encounter the sacred that point to the Triune God. Amid these rituals, the participants are amazed and awed by the most transforming feature of all: God is here. The immanence of God represented in God-centered rituals disposes the participants to be encountered by God. Even more miraculously, they will understand that God eagerly seeks to identify with them in those moments, just as God does at all times. In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the joy and love expressed during these ceremonies powerfully demonstrate the presence of Christ among God's people. From

[36]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 179. Cf. Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, no. 17.

[37]Ibid., no. 170.

[38]Ibid., no. 236.

this ritual, many have been motivated to go to their families and friends and share what God had done for them.[39]

## A Theology of the Power and the Cross

God is the God Almighty, who creates and sustains all things by divine power, who defeated Satan and associated hosts, and who will bring all things into subjection to God's eternal rule. Moreover, by his might, Jesus saves those who turn to Him and gives them the power to become like Him and bear witness to His greatness.[40] In a ritual like the *Baci-Soukhwan*, people are aware of the hierarchy of powers that affect their lives. Holding the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual also invokes a kind of supernatural power for protection or blessing. God's power is demonstrated supremely on the cross in the Christian faith. Divine power is always rooted in love, not pride, redemption, not revenge, and concern for the other, not the self. It is humble, not proud, and inviting, not rejecting. Its symbol is the cross, not the sword. That is why the world sees God's power as a weakness (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-27).

Christians and the believers of other faiths share in the common lot of fallen humanity, including famines, plagues, and illness. It does not mean that God is uninterested or uninvolved in people's situations. Rather, we realize that God is working out God's purposes in a fallen world, and that one day God will bring in a new and perfect creation.

Such a Christian perspective on human weakness, sickness, or fragility can transform the attitude of the Lao Christians when they hold the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, in a traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* wedding ritual, the widows and

[39]Paul Henry DeNeui, "Strings: Media for Gospel Communication in Northeast Thai Lan," accessed April 8, 2006, www.thaicov.org/resources/documents/string_tying.html.

[40]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 374.

divorced women are not allowed to directly participate in the preparations because they represent incomplete married life.[41] However, in the ceremony of the Lao Christians in Northeast Thailand, it is not necessary to limit the participants in preparation to older women from good marriages because they believe that no one is able to be a pure person in and of themselves or through working their own good deeds. The only way a person can be pure is to accept the work of what Christ has done and is doing in their lives. Everyone who follows God is thus in a process of becoming a pure person in Jesus Christ through the power of God. Therefore, it makes no difference whether a person has ever divorced or not if they intend to help prepare the wedding.[42] Similarly, in the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, handicapped people are viewed with deep fear and suspicion. They are generally not invited to the ritual, since they are considered not to be whole. From the observation of the author of this study when he lived in Laos, such an opinion has been eliminated, especially among the Lao Catholic community. All are invited to the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as brothers and sisters in Christ.

## A Theology of Discernment

Hiebert remarks that "people seek signs to assure them that God is present, but apart from the fruits of the Spirit, there are no self-authenticating phenomena. Miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, exorcisms, prophecies, resurrections, and other extraordinary experiences are reported in all major religions."[43] Therefore, the vital question is "what are the signs

[41]Bailey, "Communication Strategies", 267.

[42]Wetchgama, "The Influence of String Tying Ceremonies on the Isan People," 163.

[43]Ibid., 375.

that enable Christians to discern the actions of God and differentiate it from the works of self or Satan?"

In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual of Thai Isan Christians, people are aware of the difference in the meaning of the ritual compared with a traditional one though they are still resorting to a similar form. It means that Christian people can still be faithful to their tradition as Jesus Christ has changed their internal values and attitudes. Banpote Wetchgama, a leader of Thai Isan Christian community, commented on this point, "We are not the same as all other Isan people, but we are real Isan people with a new life and new set of values. Our lives are being changed each day through the power of the Holy Spirit. We follow old and traditional forms of ceremonies with new meanings. These new meanings express that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our new life."[44]

Such a new meaning of the ritual is expressed in the way the Christians perform the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, when they use the strings for wrist-tying, these strings are not referred to as sacred strings (*saisin*). Instead, it is explained that they are simply ordinary cotton thread used to represent a deeper religious meaning with no magical power attached. Even some items in the offerings on the *phakhwan* like candles, banana, betel nuts, tobacco, boiled eggs, boiled rice and alcohol may not be offered if the faithful are likely to believe that these are presents for the spirits. In general, anything in the traditional ritual that confuses people in their Christian beliefs must be used cautiously and explained clearly.

## A Theology of the Church as a Caring Community

The Church is the sign of the kingdom of God on earth. The Church must be a caring community where the fallen, sick,

[44]Wetchgama, "The Influence of String Tying Ceremonies on the Isan People," 176.

oppressed, and needy find refuge, with preferential care for the earth too. The Church must also be a place where believers gather to pray for God's blessings and God's deliverance from public crises such as droughts, plagues, and wars. In other words, the Church must be a healing community.[45] The Christian recipients themselves, like the participants of the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, will be going through some liminal phases of transition, in a liminal position of life, and for whatever reason, are also in need of special blessings from the community.[46] In this case it is the kind of community that is significantly different. They are not merely the friends, relatives, and acquaintances that have some personal interests in wanting to become more closely linked with the recipient. Rather, all are part of the body of Christ who desire to express their unity to a new member of the family of God.[47]

The liturgy is the assembly of the priestly people who respond in faith to God's gratuitous call. Therefore, the liturgy should mirror the Church's universality, which knows no barriers, no social division based on class, race, ideology or nation. The liturgical assembly should project the value of hospitality; it should become a critique of sociocultural systems that deny human equality between men and women and the dignity of those who belong to the lower ranks of society.[48]

Today, Laos still ranks among some of the poorest nations in the world, and Christian assemblies should be the pinnacle of socioeconomic equality and care for our common home.

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[45]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 377.

[46]Wetchgama, ibid., 164.

[47]DeNeui, "String Tying Ritual", 99.

[48]Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen W. Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1070.

# Conclusion and Recommendations for Inculturation of the *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual in the Lao Catholic Church

## The *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual as a Symbolic Action

In his book *The Drums of Affliction*, Victor Turner states that rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community.[49] The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual symbolizes the social structure and values of the Lao people as follows. First, the role of family is emphasized. The Lao basic social unit is the household, consisting of one or more nuclear families. Such a fact is clearly manifested in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, the *phakhwan* tray is normally used as a meal table in family, but in the ritual, it becomes the central symbol of the gathering of participants. Moreover, the family members and neighbors play crucial roles from the beginning and end of the ritual. No one can celebrate the ritual by or for themselves.

Second, village life and communal solidarity form the underlying spirit of the ritual. Beyond the nucleus of the family, the *ban* or the village is also the basic social unit in Laos. The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is the symbol of the community life in Laos. The ritual entails social acceptance and respect for the person undergoing the ritual. Curing or taking care of the soul, in effect, serves a psychological function because the ritual affirms the solidarity of those participating in it.

Finally, harmony is maintained and strengthened in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. The *Baci-Soukhwan* is performed on

[49]Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2.

occasions where there is a need for integration or restoration. Such a special meaning of the ritual is partly expressed in the decoration of the offerings. Moreover, the tying of the threads restores harmony in body, spirit, and social relationships. Harmony is understood from various aspects: between the individuals and their psyche; between the individuals and their society; between the individuals and the supernatural; and between the individuals and the universe.

## Inculturation Must Tap into the Power of Local Symbols

A symbol takes on it two simultaneous dimensions. As for the human dimension, Langdon Gilkey remarks that "religious symbols are drawn inexorably to participate in the life-world if they are to survive at all; for here alone is where reality, meaning, and transformative power are."[50] For him, symbols mean so powerfully to us because they shape and thematize our real world, our life-world, the ordinary social world in which we really are and know that we are. Regarding the religious dimension, the divine is present in the symbols that communicates the sacred presence to us through symbols, and our worship is a response to this divine presence. In this sense, any creature can become "symbols" of the divine being and activity: each in its own way, and each through its own character and integrity as a creature, becoming a medium or symbol of the ultimate. As a result, there is no clear distinction between "secular" and "religious" symbols, strictly speaking.

In the effort of inculturation in Laos, every kind of symbol must be appreciated and properly evaluated. This study presents an approach to the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, which is full of symbols. These symbols should be appropriated in Christian rites in so

[50]Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence," *Theological Studies* 35, no. 2 (May 1974): 249, doi:10.1177/004056397403500202.

far as it help the faithful experience God's lively presence in their ordinary everyday struggle in the Lao society.

### Inculturation Needs to Address Individuals

This factor is especially significant in the Lao society where every individual is associated with their households and village communities. Therefore, when the Church takes care of a believer, there is a net of social relationship in which this person is involved that the Church has to engage in pastorally. In rituals like the *Baci-Soukhwan*, a group experiences itself most intensely as a unified community, and the members recognize themselves as belonging to one another as a part of the larger village and ecclesial community. The performance communicates to all the participants the strength in solidarity and collective existence. If an individual can claim any significance, it is only by belonging to the collective, and which is determined by participating in the group's rituals.[51]

The Lao basic social units, from family to village and district (*muang*), are significant, given its hierarchy and inequality in power. There is a hierarchy within the village based on sex, ability, and official function. The village head is almost always a man, and the council of elders usually consists of men. The inculturation challenges the Lao social hierarchy by calling for the new foundation of Jesus Christ who comes to serve, not to be served. The Lao morality is built on social obligations. However, the foundation of Christian morality is, first of all, a covenant relationship between humans and the Creator-God, made manifest in Christ. Therefore, when the vertical-covenant dimension of morality is accepted, Lao Catholic women and men will be able to tap into a powerful symbolic tradition,

[51]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 301.

albeit countercultural, of rendering the selfless, giving to others at the horizontal level.[52]

### The Inculturation has to Address the Issues that Lao People Face in the Present

Hiebert remarks that many people turn to the Christian faith through ministries on an existential level. They are often in crisis, face everyday life problems, and are open to hearing new answers. We know that the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is held in almost any important event in the life of a Lao person. This ritual becomes a necessary part of Lao culture. Therefore, the inculturation of the Lao Catholic Church should deal with all issues that the Lao Catholics may encounter in their lives as citizens.

According to Hiebert, one measure of the godliness of a church is the way it treats the marginalized. The world takes care of the successful, the powerful, and the wealthy. The Church exists for others. It is entrusted with the care of those lost on the margins.[53] Actually, inculturation can be considered as a manifestation of the mystery of incarnation of Jesus in a specific culture. Therefore, the poverty of Christ and his Gospel for the poor need to be addressed to the Lao people who are poor and facing various kinds of difficulty.

### Inculturation Must Be Integrated with the Teaching Ministry of the Church

Undoubtedly, the local people know the deep, hidden meanings of their old customs and their significance in the Lao cultures. On the other hand, as Hiebert suggests, missionaries

[52]Stephen K. Bailey, "Worldview Themes in Lao Khwan Rituals" (PhD diss., School of World Mission, 2000), 75.

[53]Ibid.

may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked at some points, for they often fail to see their own cultural assumptions with a critical eye.[54] Consequently, the Christian communities will gradually purify traditional beliefs and practices and enrich them with explicit Christian meanings. The traditional rites and practices will thus become truly Christian for the Catholic Church that is seeking explicitly to proclaim and celebrate the Good News. At the same time, they will also remain authentically indigenous, for as long as the congregation has creatively generated the enriched meaning of *Baci-Soukhwan*, using traditional concepts and forms the people are familiar with in their own cultures.

[54]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 28.

# MARY:
# THE NEW ARK OF THE COVENANT IN REVELATION 11:19-12:6

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## Introduction

The Ark of the Covenant was the most significant object in the Old Testament. Its importance is all the more amplified by the fact that it was made based on the instructions of the Lord himself and was strictly followed by Moses as narrated in Exodus 25:10-22. "The Ark was the mark of the Lord's intimate presence among his people."[1] According to Hebrews 9:4, it contained three important things that signify God's loving covenant with his people namely, the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, the golden vessel of manna, and the rod of Aaron that had blossomed. Solomon made the Temple of Jerusalem in order to enshrine the Ark there.[2] "The Ark remained in the Temple approximately for four hundred years until the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (cf. Jer. 3:16)."[3] The Second Temple and the Herodian Temple did not have the Ark because it was never returned there. In other words, the Holy of Holies was empty, pointing towards the future, that one day the Ark will return.

The Ark, though significant, was not an end to itself. It was pointing towards a greater presence of God among his people. It points to the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Word made

[1]Scott Hahn, gen. ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 69.

[2]See Joseph Jensen, OSB, *God's Word to Israel, New and Augmented Edition* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 159.

[3]Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 69.

flesh, Jesus Christ. If the Ark in the Old Testament contained three important things that signify the Old Covenant between God and his people, then Mary, as the Ark of God's New Covenant, carried the Messiah. This typology was evidently present in the Gospel of Luke when the evangelist made a parallel connection with the Ark in 2 Samuel 6 and Mary's visitation to Elizabeth in 1:39-56.

The book of Revelation narrates the appearance of the Ark in God's temple in heaven in 11:19 and immediately links it to the Woman with Child in 12:1-2. This passage is interpreted differently by many biblical scholars. The purpose of this study is to examine the plausibility of this passage as a biblical reference to Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. Both affirmative and negative interpretations of Revelation 11:19-12:6 as a biblical reference for Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant will be examined in the third and most important part of this study, the exegetical-theological commentary of the said biblical passage.

## The Ark in the Old Testament

The Ark of the Covenant "has a rich biblical history. It symbolizes God's presence and the place of atonement (cf. Lev. 16:2 ff.; Heb. 9:3 ff.; 10:20), but when used wrongly, it becomes the source of the Philistines' plagues (cf. 1 Sam. 4:8) and Jericho's fall (Josh. 6:1-20). Its proper place was within the second veil of the tabernacle (Heb. 9:4, 24) and in the inner chamber of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:6)."[4] "The Ark is described in Ex. 25:10-22; 37:1-9. It was a chest made of acacia wood, about 4 feet long, 2 1/2 feet wide, and 2 1/2 feet high. It was covered with gold plates and had rings attached, through which the poles used for carrying it could be passed. Over the Ark was a

[4]Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 114.

plate of gold of the same size as the Ark, called the *kapporeth*, which is sometimes translated as 'propitiatory' or 'mercy-seat'; in accordance with the meaning of the verbal root and the role the *kapporeth* played on the Day of Atonement (*Yom ha-kippurim*: Lv 16). Two cherubim stood at the end of the kapporeth and covered with their wings."[5] "The Ark of the Covenant was holy because of what was held inside of it, and its presence became synonymous with the presence of God among the Israelites. Where the Ark of the Covenant was, there also was the presence of Yahweh."[6]

"When the Ark was carried in the open, it was covered by a veil of badger skins, and a blue cloth, concealed even from the Levite priests who were assigned to carry it"[7] (See Nm. 4:6). Later on, the blue covering cloth of the Ark will have a great influence on Marian iconography from about 500 A.D. Since the nascent Church venerated Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, she is depicted in icons wearing blue clothing, which bears the same color with the blue covering cloth of the Ark in the Old Testament.[8]

Around 960 B.C., Solomon constructed the temple of Jerusalem[9] in order to be a "fitting edifice to house the Ark of YHWH of Hosts."[10] For three centuries, the Temple housed the

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[5]Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 297-298.

[6]Tim Gray, "Mary, the God-Bearing Ark," in S*cripture and the Mystery of the Mother of God, Catholic for a Reason II,* eds. Scott Hahn and Leon J. Suprenant, Jr. (Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2006), 60.

[7]"Ark of the Covenant," accessed Nov. 6, 2022, https://www.theopedia.com/ark-of-the-covenant.

[8]See John Kubasak, "Mary and the Importance of the Color Blue," *Cora Evans Blog*, accessed November 8, 2022, https://www.coraevans.com/blog/article/mary-and-the-importance-of-the-color-blue.

[9]See Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 891.

[10]Jensen, OSB, *God's Word to Israel,* 159.

Ark and was considered as God's dwelling place on earth. But with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 25:8-9, 13-17).[11] Based on the narration of 2 Kgs 25:13-17, "the Ark was not accounted among the spoils claimed by the Babylonians."[12] According to 2 Macc 2:5, the Ark was saved by Jeremiah from destruction and hidden in a cave[13] in the mount of the Lord, Mount Nebo. According to 2 Macc 2:7, the Ark would stay there "until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy."

"In 538 B.C. Cyrus authorized the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their Temple."[14] In 515 B.C., the restored Temple, also known as the "Second Temple", was finished. In 20 B.C., Herod the Great commissioned a monumental renovation and expansion of the Second Temple.[15] According to John 2:20, it took 46 years for this Temple renovation and expansion to be completed. Despite the beauty, splendor, and magnanimous size of the Herodian Temple,[16] there was something lacking in it: the Ark of the Covenant - the Holy of Holies was empty. "First-century Jews knew full well that the current Jerusalem Temple was lacking two crucially important features. First, it was missing the glory cloud, which had departed from the Temple shortly before it was destroyed by Babylon (see Ezekiel

[11]See Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 893. Also, Wilfrid J. Harrington, S.J., *Revelation* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 126.

[12]Ibid., 69.

[13]See Andrea Spatafora. *From the 'Temple of God' to God as the Temple: A Biblical Theological Study of the Temple in the Book of Revelation* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1997), 182.

[14]De Vaux, *Ancient Israel, 323.*

[15]See Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 849.

[16]See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Orion Books, 2012), 102.

10:18-22, 11:22-23). Second, and equally devastating, it was missing the Ark."[17]

## Exegetical - Theological Commentary on Revelation 11:19-12:6

### Revelation 11:19 (Text and Commentary)

> [19] *Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there was flashes of lighting, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (RSVCE2).*

According to R.L. Thomas, "verse 19 is a transition verse having a close connection with what precedes and with what follows."[18] Verse 19 begins a new section and is essentially connected with verse 1 of the following chapter. "Although most English translations insert 'chapter' break between the appearance of the Ark and the appearance of the woman, no such division exists in the original Greek text."[19] This essential connection is more evident in the original Greek text of Revelation; both v. 19 and 12:1, 3 use the same Greek word for "appeared": *ophthe*.[20] "The repetition of the word *ophthe* (appeared) links the manifestation of the Ark in 11:19 to the heavenly signs of 12:1-2."[21] According to Craig Koester, "Some interpreters discern a sharp break between 11:19 and 12:1 or regard 11:19 as a bridge between the vision series", but he

[17]Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah* (New York: Image, 2018), 53.

[18]Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 113.

[19]Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary,* 61.

[20]See Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 113. See also, J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 146.

[21]Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 524.

continued to argue that such interpretation is not the most plausible since "the action in the heavenly temple introduces the new series, as it does in other cycles (4:1; 8:3-5; 15:5-8; cf. 19:11)."[22] This contradicts the interpretation of Adela Yarbro Collins that there is very little, if anything that links chapter 12 to the previous chapter.[23] For Koester, 11:19 is the starting verse for the fourth cycle of the book of Revelation (11:19 - 15:4), the cycle of the dragon, the beasts, and the faithful. It is the first verse of the first major section in the second half of Revelation (11:19-15:4).[24] Therefore, to isolate 11:19 from the succeeding chapter would lead to missing an important message of the last book of the Bible, "The conflict between the Creator and the destroyers of the earth"[25] which commences with the vision of the Ark's appearance in the heavenly Temple.

The appearance of the Ark in the heavenly Temple is of great significance since the holiest place in the Old Testament "was a restricted area, with access granted only to the high priest on determined occasions."[26] This heavenly appearance of the Ark marks God's self-disclosure to his people.[27] "The flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, and earthquake are typical cosmic manifestations of the revealed presence of God (Ex.19:16-18)."[28] "The Ark of the Covenant corresponds to the rewarding of the

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[22]Ibid.

[23]See Adela Yarbro Collins "Revelation," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century,* 3rd fully rev. ed., eds. John, Collins, Gina Hens-Piazza, Barbara Reid, OP and Donald Senior, CP(Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2022), 1872.

[24]See Koester. *Revelation,* 524.

[25]Ibid., 523.

[26]Roland J. Faley, *Apocalypse Then and Now: A Companion to the Book of Revelation* ( New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 101.

[27]See Michaels, *Revelation,* 146-147.

[28]Collins "Revelation," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 1872.

faithful."[29] God is now accessible to his people. "The first view into the heavenly ναος (*naos*, "temple") and the revelation of the long-lost Ark of the Covenant make this an unusually decisive moment."[30] Since the Ark was lost during the destruction of the Temple of Solomon, to see it appear after being lost for hundreds of years would really be a dramatic and decisive experience for a first-century Jew. St. John's dramatic narration caters to the Jews' longing and excitement to see the Ark once again.[31] "This appearance of the heavenly Ark indicated that the Messianic crisis was now at hand, God's covenant people and His dealings on their behalf being central subjects of the visions to follow."[32]

## Revelation 12:1-6 (Text and Commentary)

> [1] *And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman cloth with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;*
>
> [2] *she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.*
>
> [3] *And another sign appeared in heaven; behold, a great dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads.*
>
> [4] *His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the* woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth;

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[29]Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 113.

[30]Ibid., 114-115.

[31]See Scott Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 54.

[32]Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 114.

> [5] *she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne,*
>
> [6] *and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days (NRSVCE2).*

The previous commentary proves the point that Rev. 11:19 is essentially linked or connected to chapter 12, especially that of the vision of the woman and her child and the dragon. Now, the purpose of the present commentary is to examine whether the interpretation that the woman can be identified as Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and at the same time, the Ark in the heavenly Temple of 11:19 is a plausible and tenable biblical interpretation.

According to Koester, "Revelation 12 depicts a cosmic struggle of good and evil. The protagonist is a woman clothed with the sun, who has the moon under her feet and a wreath of twelve stars on her head; she labors to bear the child who is to rule the nations. The antagonist is a seven-headed dragon that prepares to devour her child."[33] "Interpretation has often focused on the identity of the woman and her significance for readers."[34] Koester pointed out four interpretations of the identity of the woman. First, she symbolizes the people of God. Second, she is identified with the Church. Third, she is identified as Mary since she gives birth to the Messiah. And finally, she is identified as Israel.[35] Yarbro Collins wrote almost the same interpretations as that of Koester but with a greater emphasis that the most likely interpretation is that the

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[33]Koester. *Revelation,* 525.

[34]Ibid.

[35]See Ibid., 525-527.

woman is the heavenly Israel.[36] Like Yarbro Collins, this is also the interpretation being held by Harrington.[37] R.L. Thomas argues that "the woman who constitutes the sign is not an actual woman, but symbolically represents some other entity or group," and to identify her as Mary, a single individual, is quite implausible.[38] Faley would simply interpret the woman as "Israel-Church, which gives birth to the Messiah."[39] For Mounce, "The woman is not Mary, the mother of Jesus, but the messianic community, the ideal Israel."[40]

The majority of the biblical scholars that are consulted above would be cautious, if not at all, to identify the woman as Mary, the mother of Jesus, with the exemption of Koester. But another group of biblical scholars and theologians would argue on the contrary. According to Mitch Pacwa, Protestant commentators would immediately identify the woman as the nation of Israel or the Church. But for him, this interpretation is quite problematic, first because "the Church did not give birth to Christ; he brought the Church into existence"[41] (without a doubt, the male child in Rev. 12 is being identified as the Messiah/Christ).[42] Second, "a nation does not get pregnant with a child; an individual woman does. Understanding the woman as a collective is therefore problematic, though she

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[36]Collins "Revelation," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 1873.

[37]See Wilfrid J. Harrington, O.P., *Revelation (*Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 130.

[38]Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 119.

[39]Faley, *Apocalypse Then and Now,* 108.

[40]Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 236.

[41]Mitch Pacwa, S.J., *Mary: Virgin, Mother and Queen, A Bible Study Guide for Catholics* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2014), 141.

[42]See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation,* 238. See also Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 121. See also Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen,* 56.

can easily be a symbol of both the Church and Israel."[43] Both Mounce and Thomas would easily identify the woman giving birth to the messianic child as Israel but never as Mary.[44] This is quite inconsistent as pointed out by Pacwa, since a nation does not give birth to an individual child, but an individual mother does. Giving birth to a child is more applicable to an individual woman than to a nation. A child only becomes a son or daughter of a nation if and only if he/she was born of an individual woman.

Furthermore, Scott Hahn argues that the woman can be identified as Mary by examining the other important figures in Rev. 12, the male child and the dragon. No doubt, the male child in the vision is a single individual. "John tells us the child 'is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,' and this is a reference to Psalm 2:9, which describes the messianic king promised by God. John also adds that this child 'was caught up to God and to His throne,' which can only refer to Jesus, who ascended into heaven."[45] Hahn also explains that the dragon is not only "an allegory but a specific person"[46] and that is the Devil or Satan (Rev. 12:9).[47]

The symbolism of the seven heads and the ten horns of the great dragon refers to individuals that tried to hinder the restoration and re-establishment of the Davidic Kingdom by Jesus. The seven heads refer to the seven Herods who ruled in the line of the founding father Antipater, and the ten horns refer to the

[43]Pacwa, S.J., *Mary: Virgin, Mother and Queen,* 141.

[44]See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation,* 238. See also Thomas, *Revelation 8-22,* 121.

[45]Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen,* 56.

[46]Ibid.

[47]See Edward Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 198.

ten Caesars in Rome's imperial line from Julius to Vespasian.[48] In other words, Satan was trying to undermine God's kingdom through the help and cooperation of certain individuals in history. Now, if the two figures, the male child and the dragon, are referred to as individuals, then it is consistent to argue that the woman is also an individual. Edward Sri has the same argument, "If the child and the dragon are individuals, then the woman should be seen, at least at some level, as an individual as well."[49] Juan Luis Bastero also made the same point, "Now, if Satan and the Messiah are historical, we should also hold as equally historical the other personages involved in the struggle - the Woman, Michael and his angels, and the devil's followers. Therefore, the woman is no mere symbol, is not just a piece of imagery, but is a real person - the Mother of the Messiah, that is, Mary."[50]

Now, the important questions that need to be answered are these: Which interpretation is plausibly correct and acceptable? Is it the interpretation that solely identifies the woman as Israel or the Church? Or the interpretation that identifies the woman as Mary, the mother of Jesus? Rene Laurentin, one of the great Mariologists of the 20th century, admits that Rev. 12 is quite an obscure passage since St. John's prophetic style mingles events and perspectives.[51] However, he argues that there is no such conflict between the interpretation that favors the woman's identity as the Church or Israel (collective) or the one that identifies her as Mary (individual). He says, "The

[48]Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen,* 57-58.

[49]Sri, *Rethinking Mary,* 199.

[50]Juan Luis Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer: A Mariology Textbook*, trans. by Michael Adams and Philip Griffin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 152.

[51]See Rene Laurentin, *Queen of Heaven: A Short Treatise on Marian Theology*, trans. from the French by Gordon Smith (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1956) 34.

twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse has Mary in view *primarily*, but *also* the Church. John has chosen to describe the one in terms appropriate to the other. It is a regular procedure of his, and he uses it to indicate a typological relation between two realities. (Compare, for instance, the discourse on the *bread of heaven*, which is at once manna, faith, and the sacrament of the Eucharist)."[52] Hugo Rahner is in agreement with Laurentin in this perspective, "This vision represented Mary, Christ's Mother, who at the foot of the cross had been entrusted to the Seer of Patmos, but only in so far as she is at the same time a symbol of the Church and the Church's fate that is both earthly and heavenly."[53]

Furthermore, Lucien Deiss, being of the same line of thought as that of Rahner and Laurentin, explains that exclusively identifying the woman solely as Mary or as the Church/Israel is to do great harm to the text. Both collective and individual identification of the woman are advantageous exegeses of the text. An interpretation that exclusively favors one and rejects the other "fragments the unity of the 'sign in heaven'... The problem of 'Mary or the Church' is a false issue; as we know, every false issue remains unresolved. We must isolate a single reality that embraces the entire ensemble of truths relating both to Mary and to the Church, a reality that can explain how the Woman is crowned with stars and clothed with the sun, cries out in the anguish of her delivery, and gives birth to the individual Messias, while yet remaining the mother of the rest of the offspring and, finally, passing a period of time in the wilderness."[54] Both the collective (Church) and individual

[52]Laurentin, *Queen of Heaven,* 34-35.

[53]Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough, O.P. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 104.

[54]Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp., *Mary, Daughter of Sion*, trans. Barbara T. Blair (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1972), 138-139.

(Mary) identification of the woman[55] attest to the depth and inexhaustible riches of the book of Revelation. The proper way to interpret the text is not by means of an *either /or* (*aut/aut*), but by a *both/and* (*et/et*) position, which is more in line with a Catholic perspective of interpreting the biblical text.

In a discussion between Catholic and Protestant scholars led by Joseph A. Fitzmyer on *the Woman in Revelation 12*, what was pointed out was the fact that the reference to Mary as the woman of Revelation remains possible but uncertain, so far as the intention of the seer of Patmos himself is concerned. They further argued that it is unavoidable to lend a Marian interpretation to the said biblical passage because the woman in the vision is presented as the mother of the Messiah.[56] They concluded their discussion by saying, "When Revelation was placed in the same canon of Scripture with the Gospel of Luke and the Fourth Gospel, the various images of the virgin, the woman at the cross, and the woman who gave birth to the Messiah would reinforce each other."[57] Therefore, the final canon of the sacred text and the essential connection of the biblical passages to each other due to the fact that the Bible now is a *one book,* are indispensable and essential principles to consider in doing exegesis, either the biblical text to be interpreted is of a Marian import or not.

Another important issue that has to be addressed in this study after establishing the biblical soundness and plausibility of the interpretation of identifying the woman of Rev. 12 as

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[55]See Paul Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), 66-67.

[56]See Robert E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and John Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 219-239.

[57]Ibid., 239.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is to examine whether the Ark of Rev. 11:19 and the Woman (Mary) of Rev. 12:1ff. are of the same identity. Alternatively, to express it more precisely in question form: "Is the Woman/Mary the Ark of the Covenant in the heavenly Temple?"

The essential connection or link between the Ark in 11:19 and the woman of 12:1ff is quite well established above, especially by considering the Greek word for "appeared" *ophthe* as noted by Koester and Thomas. Andre Feuillet explains further that the formula "and there appeared" (*kai ophthe*) is found only three times in the book of Revelation, and all three instances are here in 11:19, 12:1, and 12:3. "Now it is difficult to dissociate the first 'and there appeared' from the others. The two apparitions of the Ark of the Covenant and the Woman are seen as directly linked."[58] According to Brant Pitre, "Although Revelation does not explicitly refer to Mary as the true Ark, the fact that it describes the Ark and the woman so close to one another is remarkable... The woman is in the same place the true Ark is - the heavenly Holy of Holies."[59]

A counterargument might say that the woman being in the same place the Ark does not establish clearly that the woman is truly the Ark. But to such protest, Pitre has a further argument, that is the use of dual symbols of St. John in his writings as already mentioned above by Laurentin. "The woman and the Ark are *dual symbols* for the same person. This makes sense given John's love for dual symbols: just as the 'dragon' and the 'serpent' are dual symbols for 'the Devil' (Rev. 12:3, 9), and the 'male child' and 'the Lamb' are dual symbols for Christ (Rev. 12:5, 11), so the 'Ark' and the 'woman' are dual symbols for

[58]Andre Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother: The Role of the Virgin Mary in Salvation History and the Place of Woman in the Church*, trans. Leonard Maluf (Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1984), 23.

[59]Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary,* 62.

Mary, the mother of the Messiah (Rev. 11:19, 12:1)".[60] He also employs the use of dual symbols in his Gospel. A good example of this is John 10:7, 14 wherein the symbol of the "door of the sheep" and the "Good Shepherd" are both applied to the person of Christ.

The identity of Mary as the new Ark is further supported by comparing the contents of the Ark in the Old Testament and the person of Jesus in the New Testament. This is the argument presented by Scott Hahn,[61] Edward Sri,[62] Tim Gray[63] and Brant Pitre. Below is the table of comparison between the O.T. Ark and Mary, the N.T. Ark as presented by Pitre in his book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*[64]:

| The Ark of the Covenant | Mary, the New Ark |
|---|---|
| 1. Ten Commandments | 1. "Word" made "Flesh" |
| 2. Golden Urn of Manna | 2. "Bread of Life" from Heaven |
| 3. Staff of Aaron that Budded (Hebrews 9:4) | 3. Heavenly "High Priest" (John 1:14; 6:53-58) |

## Supporting Parallel Biblical Accounts

The *Canonical Criticism* of the Scripture is a way of interpreting the sacred text that focuses on the biblical canon itself as a finished product. This is an approach popularized by Brevard Childs.[65] It interprets a certain biblical text in the context of

[60]Ibid., 62.

[61]See Hahn, *Hail Holy Queen,* 60-61.

[62]See Sri, *Rethinking Mary,* 84-85.

[63]See Gray, "Mary, the God-Bearing Ark," *Scripture and the Mystery,* 61.

[64]Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary,* 64.

[65]See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 82-83.

the complete biblical canon. In other words, in this kind of criticism, a text must never be isolated from the other text of the Scripture. "The interpreter is forced to confront the authoritative text of scripture in a continuing theological reflection."[66] In this line of thought, the author would like to situate Rev. 11:19-12:6. What other biblical texts aside from Rev. 11:19-12:6 support the doctrine of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant? Since both Testaments Old and New are connected to each other, and no text must be interpreted in isolation, then it is simply reasonable to consider also these texts, affirming the unity of the Bible in its final form as the Christian community has it today.

For the sake of this study, three biblical passages, the two from the O.T. (Ex. 40:34-35; 2 Sam. 6:2-16) and one from the N.T. (Lk. 1:35; 39-56), would be compared through text parallelism in order to support the plausibility and soundness of seeing and interpreting Rev. 11:19-12:6 as a suitable biblical reference for the doctrine of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. The first text parallelism below is the author's extended version of the one found in Brant Pitre's book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*,[67] and the second is taken entirely from Tim Gray's article, *Mary the God-bearing Ark*.[68]

[66]Ibid., 83.

[67]See Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary,* 58.

[68]Gray, "Mary, the God-Bearing Ark," S*cripture and the Mystery,* 62. See also Sri, *Rethinking Mary,* 89.

**Exodus 40:34-35 and Luke 1:35 (Text Parallelism)**

| Exodus 40:34-35 | Luke 1:35 |
|---|---|
| Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (v. 34). | |
| Καὶ ἐκάλυψεν ἡ νεφέλη τὴν σκηνὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου, καὶ δόξης κυρίου ἐπλήσθη ἡ σκηνή·[69] | |
| And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud **abode** upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (v. 35). | The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will **overshadow** you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. |
| καὶ οὐκ ἠδυνάσθη Μωυσῆς εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν σκηνὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου, ὅτι **ἐπεσκίαζεν** ἐπ᾽ αὐτὴν ἡ νεφέλη καὶ δόξης κυρίου ἐπλήσθη ἡ σκηνή.[70] | πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σὲ<br>καὶ δύναμις ὑψίστου **ἐπισκιάσει** σοι·<br>διὸ καὶ τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον κληθήσεται υἱὸς θεοῦ.[71] |

Pitre makes an important observation by comparing the Greek version of Exodus and the original Koine Greek of Luke 1:35.[72] It is narrated in Exodus 40:34-35 that the cloud of presence *covered* or *overshadowed* the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. This is quite significant because it was in the tabernacle that the Ark of the Covenant

[69]"Septuaginta (LXX)," accessed November 19, 2022, https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/septuagint-lxx/.

[70]Ibid.

[71]"Novum Testamentum Graece," accessed November 19, 2022, https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/novum-testamentum-graece-na-28/.

[72]See Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary,* 58.

was placed, making it the most significant and holiest tent of the Israelites. Later, during the time of King Solomon, after the construction and dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, the same cloud would overshadow, and the same glory of God would fill the house of the Lord where the Ark was enshrined (1 Kings 8:10-11). In the Septuagint or Greek version of Exodus, the word used for *"overshadow"* is *episkiazo*, and this same Greek word will be used by St. Luke for the overshadowing of Mary by the Most High in 1:35. As the Ark in the Old Testament was *overshadowed* by the cloud of presence and *filled* by the glory of God, so it is of Mary, the new Ark in the New Testament. In Mary's womb, it is not simply the staff of Aaron that symbolizes the Priesthood, the urn of the heavenly bread, and the tablets of the Decalogue that are contained, but the great High Priest, the definitive Bread from Heaven and the Law or the Word himself, Jesus Christ.

2 Samuel 6:2-16 and Luke 1:39-56 (Text Parallelism)

| 2 Samuel 6:2-16 | Luke 1:39-56 |
|---|---|
| David arose and went back to Judah (v. 2) | Mary arose and went to the hill country of Judah (v. 39) |
| How can the ark of the Lord come to me (v. 9) | And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (v. 43) |
| House of Obed-edom (v. 10) | House of Zechariah (v. 40) |
| Ark there for three months (v. 11) | Mary stays three months with Elizabeth (v. 56) |
| David rejoices (v. 12) | Mary's spirit rejoices (v. 47) |
| Shouting (v. 15) | Loud cry (v. 42) |
| Leaping and dancing (v. 16) | The babe leaps in Elizabeth's womb (v. 41) |

The above several striking parallels emerge when St. Luke's account of Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth is read in

light of the Old Testament story of David bringing of the Ark of Covenant up to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel.[73] One can conclude that when St. Luke wrote the account of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth, he had this passage from 2 Samuel in mind, presenting Mary as the new Ark in a highly subtle and complex way. When Rev. 11:19-12:6 is read in consonance with these other biblical passages, one can immediately see the inner connection of the biblical texts to each other and how passages from other books of the Bible can further elucidate the meaning of a certain biblical text.

## Supporting Commentaries of the Church Fathers and the CCC

### Church Fathers

The Fathers of the Church were the earliest commentators of the Scripture and witnesses of the living Tradition of the Church. They are a group of men who lived from the later part of the 1st century to the 8th century and were known for their holiness, orthodoxy, and pastoral charity. For the purpose of this study, the writings of the following Church Fathers, namely, Sts. Hippolytus of Rome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, Athanasius of Alexandria, Jerome, and John Damascene - on the doctrine of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant would be presented. This is quite important since these writings were interpretations of the sacred text. The teachings of the Fathers were entirely based on their meditation and studies of the Scripture and in their faithful adherence to the living Tradition of the Church.

St. Hippolytus of Rome, who lived from 170 to 236 AD, has this teaching about Mary as the new Ark:

[73]See Ibid., 57.

At that time, the Savior coming from **the Virgin, the Ark, brought forth His own Body into the world from that Ark**, which was gilded with pure gold within by the Word, and without by the Holy Ghost; so that the truth was shown forth, and the Ark was manifested... And the Savior came into the world bearing the incorruptible Ark, that is to say, His own body" (S. Hippolytus, *In Dan.vi., Patr. Gr., Tom. 10,* p. 648).[74]

Here, St. Hippolytus described Mary as the Ark that brought forth the Savior into the world. The above quotation is quite important since it is one of the patristic writings from the 3rd century referring to Mary as the Ark. In other words, as early as that period, the Christian community had already venerated Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, as attested in the writings of St. Hippolytus.

St. Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem who lived from 316 to 386 AD and who is famous for his catechetical instructions, speaks of Mary as the new Ark in this way:

> We shall see that it is in **the temple of the Virgin, as in an ark that the Word of God took up His abode.** For in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, as the Scripture saith. But the testimonies in the ark were the word of God, and the wood of it was imperishable, and with pure and choicest gold was it beautified within and without" (St. Cyril, *De ador. In Spir. Et Verit,* p. 293).[75]

In this passage, Mary is not simply being referred to as the Ark but also as the Temple where the Word of God made his dwelling. Both the Temple and Ark in Old Testament are seen by St. Cyril as types of Mary.

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[74]"Church Fathers on Mary as Ark of the New Covenant," *Catholic Fidelity*, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.catholicfidelity.com/apologetics-topics/mary/church-fathers-on-mary-as-ark-of-the-new-covenant/.

[75]Ibid.

St. Ambrose, who lived from 339 to 397 AD, the great bishop of Milan and at the same time the famous mentor and baptizer of St. Augustine of Hippo, has this to say about Mary as the new Ark:

> The prophet David danced before the Ark. **Now what else should we say the Ark was but holy Mary?** The Ark bore within it the tables of the Testament, but Mary bore the Heir of the same Testament itself. The former contained in it the Law, the latter the Gospel. The one had the voice of God, the other His Word. The Ark, indeed, was radiant within and without with the glitter of gold, but holy Mary shone within and without with the splendor of virginity. The one was adorned with earthly gold, the other with heavenly (*Serm. xlii. 6, Int. Opp., S. Ambrosii*).[76]

In this commentary, St. Ambrose compared the contents of the Ark in the Old Testament and the One who was in the womb of Mary to elucidate the point that Mary is truly the new Ark that far surpassed the glory of the former one. In the Ark of the O.T., what was contained was the tablets of the Decalogue, but in the N.T., the Author himself of the Commandments, the Law, or the Word in Person is now the one contained in the womb of the Virgin.

St. Athanasius, who lived from 296 to 373 AD, the great champion of the First Council of Nicaea, the "hammer of heretics" composed this prayer addressed to the Mother of God:

> Be mindful of us, most holy virgin, who after childbirth didst remain virgin; and grant to us for these small words great gifts from the riches of thy graces, O thou full of grace. Accept them as though they were true and adequate praises in thy honor; and if there is in them any virtue and any praise, we offer them as a hymn from ourselves and from all creatures to thee, full of grace, Lady, Queen, Mistress, Mother of God, and **Ark of**

[76]Ibid.

> **sanctification** (*Orat. In Deip. Annuntiat, nn. 13, 14. Int. Opp. S. Athanasii*).[77]

In this prayer, St. Athanasius addressed Mary as the Ark of Sanctification. And in another writing, he would describe her in this way:

> O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all **O (Ark of the) Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which Divinity resides** (*Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*).[78]

St. Jerome (345-420 AD), the greatest biblical scholar of the nascent Church period, the one who translated the majority of the books of the Bible to Latin from its original languages, described Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant in one of his letters:

> Behold one in truth, the handmaid of the Lord. Holy she is, in whom is no guile, all simplicity....**The spouse of Christ is the ark of the covenant, within and without overlaid with gold, a keeper of the law of the Lord.** As in the ark there was nothing but the tables of the Testament, so too in thee no one from outside should be thought of. Over this propitiatory, as though upon the Cherubim, the Lord is pleased to sit....The Apostle thus defines a virgin, that she should be holy in body and in spirit..." (*Epist. Xxii., Ad Eustoch. Nn. 18, 19, 21, 24*).[79]

St. John Damascene (675-749 AD), who is considered as the last Father from the East, commented on Revelation 19:11 in

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[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

one of his famous homilies, identifying the heavenly Ark as Mary:

> Today the holy **Virgin of Virgins** is presented in the heavenly temple.... Today **the sacred and living Ark of the living God [the Ark], who conceived her Creator himself,** takes up her abode in the temple of God, not made by human hands.[80]

The above quotations from the six Church Fathers are far from being exhaustive, but they are enough to prove how the nascent Church saw Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. It only means to say that this doctrine is not a recent modern invention but a very ancient teaching that the Church continues to uphold. It even entered into the popular piety of the faithful. This is evident in the famous Marian Litany of Loreto wherein one of the titles given to Mary is *Foederis Arca* (Ark of the Covenant).[81]

## Catechism of the Catholic Church

After examining some of the writings of the Church Fathers, the author turns now his attention to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[82] in order to see how this catechetical document presented Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. The passage of concern for this part of the study is the *Catechism's* explanation of one of the lines of the most popular Marian prayer in Catholic tradition, *Ave Maria*:

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[80]John Damascene, *Homily II on the Dormition*, 2, PG 96, 723 as quoted by Benedict XVI in his *Homily on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Homilies, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011.

[81]See Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Homilies, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011.

[82] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano, 1993).

> *Full of grace, the Lord is with thee*: These two phrases of the angel's greeting shed light on one another. Mary is full of grace because the Lord is with her. The grace with which she is filled is the presence of him who is the source of all grace. "Rejoice... O Daughter of Jerusalem... the Lord your God is in your midst" (Zeph 3:14, 17a). **Mary, in whom the Lord himself has just made his dwelling, is the daughter of Zion in person, the ark of the covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells.** She is "the dwelling of God... with men" (Rev 21:3). Full of grace, Mary is wholly given over to him who has come to dwell in her and whom she is about to give to the world [emphasis added].[83]

In this paragraph, the *Catechism* describes Mary as "daughter of Zion in person" and the "Ark of the Covenant." These are both indispensable and interesting descriptions since the *Ark* (Exodus 25:10-22) and the *daughter of Zion* (2 Kings 19:21; Psalm 9:14; Isaiah 52:2) are both taken from the Old Testament, but now the *Catechism* applies them to Mary. The first thing to consider is the phrase *daughter of Zion.* According to Haffner, "In the Old Testament, Sion or Jerusalem is depicted as Spouse and Daughter, Virgin and Mother as is Mary in the New. Daughter Sion is the Spouse of Yahweh, Mother of the People of God (Mother Sion), the Virgin Israel."[84] Israel, the community of believers in the Old Covenant, was depicted as the daughter and spouse of Yahweh. One can immediately recall the imagery of husband and wife, of bridegroom and bride that can be found in the prophetic writings: God as the husband and Israel as his wife (Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:1-20). This depiction of Israel is now perfectly personified in the person of Mary. God in the Old Testament did everything to make Israel, that is Daughter/Mother Zion to be his perfect spouse, but the infidelities of the Israelites made this impossible and yet the hope of reaching

[83]*CCC* no. 2676.

[84]Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary,* 28.

this perfection was never abandoned in salvation history. Now, in the person of Mary, the figure of Daughter/Mother Zion finds its fulfillment and perfection. Here is the perfect daughter of God, the Father, and the faithful spouse of the Holy Spirit. Both the People of God in the Old Testament and the New Israel, the Church, are now exemplified in the person of Mary. This thought is critical since it is in consonance with the interpretation above that the *Woman* of Revelation refers both to Mary and to the Church, the new Israel.

The second important thing to consider is the *Catechism's* depiction of *Mary* as *the Ark of the Covenant*. Mary as the Ark is justified by the *Catechism* by stating that she is *"the place where the glory of God dwells"* and by quoting Rev 21:3 and applying this passage to the person of Mary. "For the first time in the plan of salvation and because his Spirit had prepared her, the Father found the *dwelling place* where his Son and his Spirit could dwell among men."[85] Reading between the lines, the *Catechism* presents Mary as the Ark of the Covenant because what was prefigured by what was inside of the Ark in the Old Testament is now perfectly fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, born of the Virgin Mary.

By applying the title of *daughter of Zion* and the *Ark of the Covenant* to Mary, the *Catechism* confirms the interpretation in this study that both the collective identification (Church) and the personal identification (Mary) of the *Woman* of Revelation 12 is correct and plausible. There is no conflict between the ecclesiological and mariological interpretation of the said text because Mary is the perfect personification of the Church and at the same time, the exemplary member of the Church.[86]

[85]*CCC* no. 721.

[86]See Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/, nos. 60-65.

"Everything said about the *ecclesia* in the Bible is true of her, and vice versa: the Church learns concretely what she is and is meant to be by looking at Mary."[87]

## Supporting Commentaries by Two Contemporary Theologians

It is without a doubt that Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI (1927-2023) and Bishop Robert Barron (1959-present) are two of the most brilliant and compelling Catholic theologians of this contemporary period. Ratzinger was one of the *periti* (theological experts) of the Second Vatican Council that made significant reforms for the universal Church from the middle of the 20th century to the present times. He is the only *peritus* of Vatican II who is still alive. The others like Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Louis Bouyer died many years ago since they were far older than Ratzinger. He is an expert in Dogma and Fundamental Theology, but his works reveal that his dogmatic and fundamental theology are highly based on a careful exegesis of the Scripture. Scott Hahn made a significant study of his writings reveal a well-developed biblical theology based on a careful and critical exegesis of the biblical texts.[88]

Robert Barron, at present, is the bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester[89] and the founder of the Word on Fire Ministry. An alumnus of both the Catholic University of America and *Institut Catholique de Paris*. Barron is one of the

[87]Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Mary the Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 66.

[88]See Scott Hahn, *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Michigan: Baker Brazos Press, 2009).

[89]"Bishop Barron to lead Diocese of Winona-Rochester," *La Crosse Tribune*, accessed November 18, 2022, https://lacrossetribune.com/winona/news/local/bishop-barron-to-lead-diocese-of-winona-rochester/.

most popular religious figures in the Internet, famous for his theological commentaries on Church doctrine, biblical commentaries on liturgical readings, and his rational and compelling engagement with the popular culture expressed in commentaries on political events and current movies. Though an expert in Thomistic theology and philosophy, Barron has written numerous studies and commentaries on the Scripture. He is known for writing a theological commentary on 2 Samuel[90] and for his initiative of creating the *Word on Fire Bible*, a biblical commentary that does not only use commentaries from the Church Fathers, saints, exegetes, and theologians, but also works of art such as pictures of paintings and statues that would help better elucidate the meaning of the biblical texts. At the moment, the Word on Fire Bible Project has produced two volumes, first, on the Gospels[91] and second, on the Acts of the Apostles to the book of Revelation.[92]

In this part of the study, the author would like to examine the commentaries of these two theologians on Revelation 11:19-12:6 found in their theological writings.

## Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI

During the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 2011, Benedict XVI in his homily commented on the first reading of the said liturgical celebration and fortunately, it is the passage of concern of this study, Revelation 11:19-12:6. It is noteworthy to emphasize that in this homily,

[90]See Robert Barron, *2 Samuel (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015).

[91]See *The Word on Fire Bible*. Vol. 1, The Gospels (Park Ridge: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020).

[92]See *The Word on Fire Bible,* Vol. 2, Acts, Letters and Revelation (Park Ridge: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2022).

he identified the Ark of Rev. 11:19 and the Woman of Rev. 12:1 as Mary, the Mother of God:

What is the meaning of the ark? What appears? For the Old Testament, it is the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people. However, the symbol has given way to reality. Thus the New Testament tells us that the true ark of the covenant is a living, real person: it is the Virgin Mary. God does not dwell in a piece of furniture, he dwells in a person, in a heart: Mary, the One who carried in her womb the eternal Son of God made man, Jesus our Lord and Savior."[93]

In this commentary, Benedict XVI, in his usual profound theological and catechetical homiletic style, is in agreement with the findings of this study as presented in part 3. He identified the Ark of Rev. 11:19 as Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Woman of Revelation. He pointed out, like many of the Church Fathers, that the Ark of the Old Testament was a type of the definitive and new Ark, that God does not so much dwell in a piece of furniture but on a living person. This contrast between the Ark of the Old and that of the New Covenant is highly significant since it only shows that the Old Covenant is not abolished but perfected in the New. In the person of Mary, the Ark of Old has its definitive fulfillment as God's dwelling place among his people. He further said in his homily that the Christian should be like Mary, that in his "modest way," he is "an 'ark' in which the Word of God is present, transformed and quickened by his presence, a place of the presence of God, so that men and women may find God's closeness in the other person, and thus live in communion with God and know the reality of Heaven."[94]

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[93]Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

[94]Ibid.

He further explained why Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant in this way:

> Mary is the Ark of the Covenant because she welcomed Jesus within her; she welcomed within her the living Word, the whole content of God's will, of God's truth; she welcomed within her the One who is the new and eternal Covenant, which culminated in the offering of his Body and his Blood: a body and blood received through Mary...
>
> The passage from the Book of Revelation also indicates another important aspect of Mary's reality. As the living Ark of the Covenant, she has an extraordinary destiny of glory because she is so closely united to the Son whom she welcomed in faith and generated in the flesh, as to share fully in his glory in Heaven.[95]

The use of Rev. 11:19-12:6 as the first reading of the Solemnity of the Assumption is an indication on how the Church understands and interprets this biblical passage. If the Church does not consider it as a passage of a Mariological import, surely it will not be used in one of her most important liturgical celebrations. One has only to remember that whatever is in the liturgy either words, gestures, or symbols, are there in order to express the faith of the Church. This is encapsulated in one of the ancient ecclesiastical axioms written by Prosper of Aquitaine: "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*" (The law of prayer is the law of faith).[96] Furthermore, the homily of the Pope is always an exercise of the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. The authentic interpretation of the sacred text is a task given by God to the Church, especially to the Pope and the bishops, the successors of the apostles.[97] In other words, Benedict XVI's

[95]Ibid.

[96]See *CCC* no. 1124.

[97]See Ibid. no. 85.

interpretation of Rev. 11:19-12:6 has a significant influence on how this passage must be understood by the faithful.

## Robert Barron

In the *Word on Fire Bible,* vol. 2, Robert Barron commented on Rev. 11:19-12:1, and it is good to quote his whole commentary in order to show how his biblical interpretation is in line with the findings so far presented in this study:

> In the twelfth chapter of Revelation, John sees a vision of a woman clothed in the sun, with a crown of twelve stars upon her head and the moon at her feet. And at the very end of the eleventh chapter, we hear that John looks into the heavenly temple and sees the ark of the covenant. Keep in mind that the division of this text into chapters came much later, so these two scenes are, in fact, tightly associated.
>
> The ark, of course, was the most sacred object for ancient Israel, since it contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments (see Deut. 10:2). David danced before the ark as it was brought into his capital city of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14), and frequently, this sacred object accompanied Israel when the nation went into battle (see 1 Sam. 4:3). And so it is easy enough to see the reason behind the juxtaposition of John's two visions, for Mary the Mother of God, in whose womb the Word of God was pleased to dwell, is herself the definitive Ark of the Covenant, the bearer of the divine presence. This is why the infant John the Baptist, still in his mother's womb, performed a David-like dance before the true ark, leaping for joy when Mary greeted Elizabeth (Luke 1:41).[98]

This commentary of Barron shows his agreement with the interpretations of Hahn, Pitre, Sri, Gray, and Pope Emeritus

[98]Robert Barron, "Mary the New Ark," *The Word on Fire Bible*. Vol. 2, Acts, Letters and Revelation (Park Ridge: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2022), 770-771.

Benedict XVI. In a two-paragraph commentary, Barron was able to encapsulate in a compelling manner the arguments for Rev. 11:19-12:1 as a biblical reference for Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant.

## Conclusion

This study has presented the historical background of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament and the biblical arguments and interpretations, both affirmative and negative on Rev. 11:19-12:6 as a biblical reference for the Marian doctrine of Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. The author also included parallel biblical passages, commentaries of the Church Fathers, the teaching of the Catechism, and the biblical commentaries of Benedict XVI and Robert Barron to elucidate further the main argument of this study. Hopefully, the things presented above will help readers understand why Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant and will aid in the increase of their faith in Christ and in their love and devotion to the Blessed Mother. This study is far from comprehensive and exhaustive; however, the author has tried his best to collect the necessary materials to present a compelling research worthy of giving honor to the Mother of God.

# BACCALAUREATE IN SACRED THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY SYNTHESIS PAPERS

# FATHOMING FAITH:
## A PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS ON FAITH AND REASON

*Martin Wang, SJ*

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According to Gabriel Marcel, the process of examining an object through primary reflection involves breaking it down into elemental parts, assigning labels and categories, and defining each part. This method is often used when introducing ourselves, as we mention various aspects of our identity like our name, age, origin, and profession. For instance, when describing myself, I would typically include details such as being from China, identifying as a Catholic, and belonging to the religious order of the Society of Jesus, commonly known as a Jesuit. It is interesting to observe how these seemingly unrelated terms come together to form a unique and intriguing identity: Chinese, Catholic, and Jesuit. This combination may spark curiosity in others due to common associations with China like "communism," "authoritarianism," "atheism," and "religious persecution." Furthermore, being a Catholic in China adds another layer of interest and questions from others, such as "How did you become a Catholic?" "How do you practice your faith in China?" or "What does it feel like to be a Catholic in China?" Marcel's insight is right – merely combining different categories cannot fully capture the richness of an object's meaning. In a similar vein, there is much to explore and understand about my identity as both Chinese and Catholic.

In contemporary China, despite the existence of religious beliefs like Daoism, Buddhism, and folk religions, the prevailing societal trend is toward atheism, largely influenced by current

political ideology and education. This has resulted in a very small percentage of Catholics in the country, making me, as a Catholic, feel the uniqueness of my identity. As the lone Catholic in my school classes, I often find myself standing apart from my peers. While they enjoy their Sundays with friends, I attend Mass, further highlighting the distinction between my beliefs and the mainstream culture. After completing college, my decision to apply to become a Jesuit left my classmates puzzled, as they had little understanding of my spiritual calling. Being part of a religious minority in such an environment presents numerous challenges, particularly from the dominant culture and its emphasis on rationality. The prevailing education often exposes us to critiques of religion, with figures like Karl Marx depicting it as the "opium of the people," and highlighting the dark history of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Additionally, the pervasive materialistic culture reinforces the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and personal gain as the primary priorities, leaving little room for spiritual considerations.

Despite these challenges, being a Catholic in China grants me a unique perspective and helps me develop a profound understanding of my faith and identity. It requires resilience, as I navigate through a society that may not fully comprehend or support my beliefs. Along with the desire to defend my faith, there are inevitable questions: Is my faith really true? What makes me sure of it? Despite these doubts, faith also broadens my horizon and provides an opportunity for personal growth and deeper spiritual convictions about our life's origin, purpose, meaning and destiny. Embracing my religious identity in the face of prevailing secularism fosters a sense of authenticity and strengthens my commitment to my beliefs. As I continue to stand out as a Catholic in an atheistic society, I strive to foster understanding and dialogue between different belief systems that seek answers to life's deeper questions, and

find purpose and meaning for existence. Unlike mathematical truths or empirical truths that can be objectively demonstrated and verified, beliefs in abstract concepts like a triune God, the real presence of Jesus in the blessed host, or the existence of purgatory are not subject to the same methods of reasoning or empirical evidence that demonstrates how hydrogen will burn with a pale blue flame in oxygen. The phrase "built on beliefs" can indeed evoke feelings of unease, as beliefs often imply subjectivity and lack concrete, tangible evidence. It can lead to questioning the foundations of one's worldview and the idea that subjective opinions shape our entire being. This raises the crucial question: Why should I continue to hold onto beliefs that lack empirical evidence?

Even after joining the Jesuits, my skeptical tendency persisted, leading me to undergo a challenging faith crisis in the novitiate. It was just before the 30-day retreat when unsettling thoughts began to trouble me profoundly. I found myself questioning the authenticity of the Spiritual Exercises, wondering if they were merely human inventions. Doubts surfaced about the concepts of consolation, desolation, and discernment, and I even questioned the authenticity of my own contemplative experiences, fearing they might be mere products of my imagination. These speculations took a toll on me, shaking the very foundation of my beliefs and leaving me feeling knocked down, confused, and in a state of panic. I knew seeking help from my novice master was essential, but I felt ashamed and afraid. After all, I was a Jesuit in training, about to embark on the Spiritual Exercises, a profoundly significant experience for a Jesuit, yet I found myself grappling with doubts about the existence of God.

In the end, I mustered the courage to confide in my novice master, and his response was a lifeline that saved me from my

turmoil. With utmost simplicity, he reassured me, saying, "You are just allowing those thoughts to drag you nowhere. Don't worry. Just trust in the Lord!" His words were comforting, but what truly made a difference was his attitude. He remained composed and unfazed, contrary to the fear I had of shocking or disappointing him. In that moment, a profound realization washed over me: doubt, instead of being a frightening adversary, could be a natural and acceptable part of one's spiritual journey. It didn't have to threaten or diminish my faith. I began to understand that I could hold onto my faith even while grappling with lingering doubts.

Currently, I find myself in a place where I am not experiencing a faith crisis. The years of formation and life experiences have contributed to the growth and deepening of my faith. However, being a student of philosophy, I remain intrigued by the topic and would like to explore how philosophy views faith. Is faith considered justifiable from a philosophical standpoint? And how can philosophy support and inform the leap of faith, especially considering my future ministry to the people of China?

As I embark on this journey of exploration, I come to a realization that the term "faith" encompasses two essential dimensions. In a broader sense, it signifies the act of believing, while in a narrower context, it specifically pertains to religious faith, particularly in my case, being a Catholic. Although these two aspects are interrelated and often intertwined, I do not plan to consistently make a rigid distinction between them throughout this paper. Understanding one facet will naturally shed light on the other, as they complement and enrich each other in the context of my experiences and reflections.

## From *Mythos* to *Logos*

The connection between faith and philosophy is a thought-provoking question, particularly given the perception that philosophy relies on reason, while faith may be seen as based on subjective and unfounded assumptions. The famous remark by Karl Marx, referring to religion as the "opium of the people,"[1] aligns with the skepticism many hold towards religion. To some, faith may appear as an illusion, born out of the human need for understanding reality and seeking emotional comfort. It is understandable that we naturally seek to comprehend the world we inhabit, its phenomena, our surroundings, and ourselves. However, the complexity of reality often surpasses our cognitive abilities. We encounter events and circumstances that are beyond our control, such as natural disasters and death, which can provoke fear and anxiety. This has historically led ancient civilizations to turn to supernatural explanations, as reflected in the diverse mythologies that emerged across different cultures.

Ancient Greek Philosophy emerges as a remarkable departure from prevalent mythological beliefs, establishing reason as its cornerstone. Its inception is marked by a profound shift towards using rationality to comprehend the world. Thales, regarded as the first Western philosopher, exemplifies this departure by employing a rational, non-mythological approach to explaining the natural world. In contrast to invoking supernatural entities to account for the cosmos' origin, Thales observed the motion of water and its transformations into various forms. This careful observation led him to propose that water was the primordial substance from which the universe originated. This rational, empirical method set Thales apart

[1]Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right 1844," *Marxists.org*, accessed March 22, 2023, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm.

and positioned him as a pioneer in the realm of philosophical inquiry with *Logos* (reason) as its essential element.

If that is how philosophy started, would this mean that philosophy ought to dismiss mythology right away? After all, Christian narratives such as Genesis stories appear to be none other than another set of myths. I recall here what I have learned from my Philosophy of Nature class that inspires me to look deeper into the essence of myths. Different from how we often perceive the word "myth" as a "false" account, ancient Greeks referred to the word "*mythos*" simply as a "story" without the immediate tendency to evaluate the story as true or merely fantastical. Myths, in nature, are human attempts to make sense of the world. American historian and religious studies scholar Jeffrey Burton Russell holds a similar opinion. He proposes that "the proper language of religion is metaphor.[2]" He argues that since very early on, metaphor had been recognized as a means to express a deeper reality, and early Church Fathers such as Augustine "regarded the Bible as revealed and everything in it as meaningful."[3] Thus he proposes to interpret religious language in a metaphorical sense. This perspective inspires me to examine the truth claims of the Christian faith from a metaphorical standpoint, considering their reasonableness in a symbolic rather than a strict literal sense.

When approached metaphorically, the entirety of the Bible—the narrative of salvation—conveys a fundamental message (as I understand it): our origin lies in God, our purpose is to forge a connection with God, and our lives should mirror the divine nature. For believers, this message makes sense because it speaks to their hearts, to their innermost longing for truth,

[2]Jeffrey Burton Russell, "Science, Religion, Metaphor, and History," *Science, Religion, and the Human Experience*, ed. James D. Proctor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111-128.

[3]Ibid.

for meaning, for love, and for something greater. In fact, that longing seems to be universal. Plato's contemplation of the real, Aristotle's passion for virtue and human flourishing, Ancient Chinese thinkers' quest for the mandate of Heaven,[4] Augustine's restless heart,[5] Ignatius' marveling at the night sky,[6] Kant's admiration and awe at the starry heavens and moral law[7], Heidegger's puzzle about "why is there something rather than nothing? [8]"...all speak of that longing.

For believers, that longing is answered in faith. Justin Martyr, after begging for enlightenment from various philosophies-Stoic, Pythagorean, Platonic-was conquered completely by adhering to Christ, whom he believed to be *Logos* itself. Justin believes that man, through her intellect, participates in some way in Divine Reason-the eternal *Logos*. However, it can never be known entirely unless revealed by Christ, who is the *Logos* Himself.[9] Clement of Alexandria affirms the significance of philosophy as "a cause which concurs and cooperates in

[4]Wikimedia Foundation, "Mandate of Heaven," March 2, 2023, *Wikipedia*, accessed March 22, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandate_of_Heaven.

[5]Augustine, *Confessions Book I*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.

[6]J. F. O'Callaghan, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola with Related Documents* (New York: Harper&Row, Publishers, 1974), 25.

[7]Immanuel Kant, "Conclusion," *Critique of Practical* Reason, trans. Stephen Engstrom and introduced by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 203.

[8]Martin Heidegger, "The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics," *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), 8.

[9]Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

the apprehension of truth"[10] but points out its insufficiency in attaining the truth. According to Clement, there is only one way to truth, and that is Christ, the "Logos." Justin and Clement elucidate that Christian faith is the perfection of reason; it is the total and complete philosophy that grants us clarity and answers our longing, which Augustine phrases as *crede ut intellegas* (believe so that you may understand).

Is this not an apt description of our own journey to faith? Fr. Arnel Aquino, S.J. articulates it beautifully in a song entitled *Dwells God*: "Behind our restless search for greater meaning, and answers to our deepest questioning, dwells God." We have been on a quest for our personal "philosophy," guided by our own reasoning, in search of what we perceive as meaningful and fulfilling. Whether it is knowledge, pleasure, achievements, recognition, emotional solace, or other pursuits, we tirelessly seek them. Yet, despite our endeavors, a sense of longing persists until we are illuminated by the light that faith unveils: a light that bestows upon us insights about our origins, our purpose, and our ultimate destiny. This radiant light prompts us to confront a pivotal decision—to either disregard it and persist on our individual paths or to warmly embrace it.

Bishop Barron says, in one of his homilies, that when Jesus said that "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he "compels a choice in a manner that no other religious founder does," and we can either believe "he is who he says he is," or "he is a madman."[11] This inspires me to look at my family's journey to faith. I learned that the Catholic history of my family starts from my great-grandfather, who used to be a superstitious

[10]Clement of Alexandria, "Stromata", eds. Otto Stählin et al. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1954-1996), I.20.

[11]Bishop Robert Barron, "Gospel Reflection - Friday, May 13, 2022," *Word on Fire*, accessed March 18, 2023, https://www.wordonfire.org/reflections/c-easter-wk4-friday/.

Chinese folk religion practitioner. For a long time, he suffered from a chronic illness until he met a missionary, also a medical doctor, who not only cured his body but also led him to the realm of faith. In the end, he made the decision to leave his former practice and became a Catholic. My mother was not a born Catholic either. As a young girl, like many of her peers, she was just living her ordinary life without much thinking until one day, a priest gave her a book introducing the Catholic faith. While reading it, she started thinking about the question that she had never paid attention to: what is the meaning of life? The world of faith which unfolded before her was a breath of fresh air. She felt so fascinated and eventually received baptism. For believers, faith is not nonsense. It is profoundly meaningful for them; it provides answers that grant a clearer vision and compel them to believe.

However, my quest continues: do I accept faith because it could provide me with some answers? How will I know these are really the right answers? Justin and Clement's emphasis on faith as the perfection of reason puts faith in a position that is superior to reason. Thus, faith is the precondition to the comprehension of reality. If you want to know, you must believe. If you believe it, it will make sense. But would that mean that people can grab a belief and use that as a lens to interpret reality as long as they themselves hold it as true? If so, wouldn't it also be misleading or even dangerous? One may believe that climate change is caused by an external force like aliens; it grants him an understanding, but would this merit its legitimacy? Hitler may firmly believe that his antisemitism is necessary to protect the purity of the blood of the "Aryan race"- a superior "master race," but can it justify his crime against humanity? Some people accuse religion of causing many religious wars in history; isn't it revelatory of the dangers fanatic beliefs may result to? I realize, therefore, that it is not

enough to embrace faith only for the sake of understanding. It has to be the right understanding, or else it may be just an illusion. True faith should be grounded in reality.

## Faith as Eminently Reasonable

The philosopher who profoundly exemplifies the reasonableness of faith is none other than Thomas Aquinas. He emphatically asserted that "the Christian faith is eminently reasonable," endeavoring to harmonize reason and faith as a unified whole. According to Aquinas, it is not solely faith that assists reason; reason, in turn, can provide invaluable support to faith. One of the most compelling illustrations of this synergy is found in his famous argument for the existence of God - the Five Ways.[12] Aquinas initiates this philosophical journey by drawing our attention to general features of the world, grounded in our everyday experiences. He examines concepts such as motion, cause and effect, change, the good and the beautiful, as well as the purpose inherent in various phenomena. Through this comprehensive analysis, Aquinas raises thought-provoking questions that demand answers beyond the observable and empirical realm. Subsequently, Aquinas presents a plausible, reasonable, and ultimate response to these inquiries: the existence of a necessary being, whom he identifies as the unmoved mover, the uncaused cause, the supreme perfection, and the *telos*, ultimate purpose of all things whom we may call "God."

I admire Aquinas' genius and wisdom. He does not argue simply from his own vantage point, imposing his own opinions on others. He does not find recourse solely on the Bible or revelation to justify his stands. Rather, he meets people where they

[12]St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica,* complete ed., trans. Fathers of the Eastern Dominican Province (New York: Catholic Way Publishing, 2014), Ibid. I, q.2, a. 3.

are, presenting his points on the basis of our mundane experiences. Employing the language of reason, he shows that the existence of God is not merely an arbitrary opinion or a human fabrication; rather, he presents it as a logical assumption. It makes sense, therefore, for us to believe in Him. Aquinas' method offers me insight for my future dialogue with others that the leap of faith should come from where we are, from our daily experience, from the same physical reality we share, and from the faculty of reason with which we are all bestowed.

Aquinas' method helps me to discover and appreciate the reasonableness of my faith. It reminds me of an image derived from Jesus' parable on the grain of wheat dying into the earth and bearing fruit. As wheat grows toward the sky, it also roots itself deeply into the ground. Such is my faith: it speaks of something beyond full comprehension, but it is grounded on reason and thus, believable. Among the Five Ways Aquinas presents, I am especially fascinated by the second one: insofar as everything is caused by other things, there must be something as the primary cause. The argument is simple, direct, and powerful. It addresses humankind's wonder throughout generations: why is there being? It is also the question that constantly compels me to turn to God. No matter how much we have been informed by modern science about how everything works, we still beg the question - why is there "stuff" in the first place, for everything to work on? Some people hold that modern science, especially cosmology, due to its capability to explain the evolution of the universe and even its possible beginning, has in fact, disproved the existence of a Creator. With regard to this, American physicist Stephen Matthew Barr responds in an interview by distinguishing the beginning of the universe from its source. He says: "The argument for God is not that the universe has a beginning; rather, it's that

the universe has existence.[13]" To explain his point, he uses the analogy of a symphony- the beginning of a symphony is the first note; the origin of the symphony is the creative mind of the composer. One, having figured out the first note of the symphony, in no way can we conclude that it does not need a composer. Similarly, scientific theories such as the Big Bang may prove that the universe has a beginning, but it is not the same as saying that the beginning has no cause. Barr argues further that even if some scientists may claim that the universe does not have a beginning or end (in that sense, there could be a symphony that goes on and on), it still needs to face the question - why is there existence, because the "universe is a not fictitious or hypothetical or possible world but a real world."[14]

Bertrand Russell's statement that "the universe needs no explanation; it is just there, and that's all[15]" stands in stark contrast to Barr's and does not look satisfactory. Regarding the potential role of God in the creation of the world, Stephen Barr's response is not only lucid but also compelling. The viewpoints presented by both Aquinas and Barr offer valuable insights that can serve as effective tools in engaging in meaningful dialogues with others, assisting them in considering and perhaps even embracing a leap of faith.

Nevertheless, I cannot ignore the feeling that something is missing. While the arguments presented by Aquinas and Barr appear robust in demonstrating the reasonableness of positing

[13]"Stephen Barr - Cosmology and Creation." *YouTube*, 21 Oct. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lqGUMmPk_Y.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Godwin, Simon J. "Philosophy of Religion: Transcript of the Russell/Copleston Radio Debate," *Scandalon*, accessed March 18, 2023, http://www.scandalon.co.uk/philosophy/cosmological_radio.htm.

God as the ultimate explanation of reality, they do not inherently guide us toward embracing the concept of the Christian God. So, how do I navigate from here? It is becoming apparent that my philosophical expedition has reached the boundaries of reason itself.

I turn to Aquinas again. I realize that though Aquinas affirms the value of rational knowledge of God, he also acknowledges its limitations. Our concepts are always abstracted from our sensible world; they are always perspectival and limited. The God Aquinas talks about is the God of faith, the infinite and the inexhaustible, which determines that reason is never sufficient to comprehend Him. Aquinas never intends to show that faith is produced by reason; rather, he shows that reason serves faith. The starting point is faith. Jean Daniélou comments on Aquinas' wisdom by saying: "By presenting at the same time in a rigorous fashion the value and the limitations of the rational knowledge of God, Aquinas reveals the paradox of the philosophical quest. For God is at the same time its object and its boundary, its supreme end and its question mark.[16]" If I accept that God exists beyond the scope of my comprehension, then it logically follows that I cannot attain complete understanding of Him solely through rational means. This perspective resonates with me. Aquinas proposes that God is a being who actively reveals and communicates. This revelation is not confined to human reason alone; it extends to creation, divine providence, historical narratives like those of Israel, the voices of prophets, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing guidance of the Church.To me, this assertion remains compelling. If we can recognize the knowability of God's existence through reasoned exploration, there seems to be no inherent barrier to believing that He would also make Himself knowable and approachable

[16]Jean Daniélou, "The God of the Philosophers," *God and the Ways of Knowing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 50.

through alternative avenues. This perspective acknowledges that the Divine can communicate with humanity in diverse ways beyond the confines of philosophical reasoning alone.

## Reason Venturing into the Inexhaustible

I envision presenting this line of reasoning to my fellow atheist countrymen: "Indeed, reason can lead us to grasp aspects of the truth inherent in the Christian faith. However, the full extent of truth is unveiled through divine revelation. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of truth requires a belief in this revelation." In response, they might furrow their brows and counter, "If belief is a prerequisite, then what's the purpose of reasoning? How can you assert that your revelation is logical and worth embracing? Is revelation beyond questioning?" These reactions are predictable in philosophical discussions. A parallel discourse arises in the realm of Christian Philosophy, where the integration of faith and reason sparks debate. Christians are guided by faith, while philosophy operates on the principles of reason. The question emerges: can these two realms harmonize? Supporters often invoke the example of Thomas Aquinas. Despite being a Christian, Aquinas skillfully employs Aristotelian concepts to bolster the reasonableness of faith, effectively navigating as a philosopher. Detractors, however, argue that prioritizing faith as the ultimate truth creates boundaries for reason. In essence, they claim that faith-based assertions hinder and constrict the progress of rational inquiry. Thus, faith works against philosophy. One philosopher who may hold a similar perspective is Martin Heidegger, who says:

> Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" before it is even asked: beings, with the exception of God Himself, are created by

> Him. God Himself "is" the uncreated Creator. One who holds on to such faith as a basis can, perhaps, emulate and participate in the asking of our question in a certain way, but he cannot authentically question without giving himself up as a believer, with all the consequences of this step. He can act only "as if"... philosophizing means asking, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" Actually, asking this means venturing to exhaust, to question thoroughly, the inexhaustible wealth of this question by unveiling what it demands that we question.[17]

"Venturing to exhaust, to question thoroughly" even if the question itself seems inexhaustible, speaks of the rigor philosophers have in their quest for truth. However, one danger this may pose is to invalidate faith as among the valid sources of truth. A notable model of this absolutist mentality is none other than Rene Descartes, who subjected all his knowledge and opinions to his doubting mind, "eliminating everything in which there is the smallest element of doubt... until (I) discover something certain"[18]. In coining *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am)[19]- Descartes arrives at the insight that the act of thinking is the ultimate ground of human knowledge. It is a proclamation of the supremacy of reason. Under its light, any claim, including religious doctrines, must be subject to the authority of reason. With the development of modern science and technology, rationalism degenerates into scientism, that "science and scientific method are the best or only way to render truth about the world and reality"[20]. Thus,

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[17]Martin Heidegger, "The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics," 8.

[18]René Descartes, "Second Meditation," *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. M. Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Wikimedia Foundation, "Scientism," *Wikipedia* (March 14, 2023), retrieved March 18, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientism.

religious beliefs that fail the test of science are taken to have no credibility.

This ideology is widely prevalent among contemporary Chinese individuals. Our education system promotes atheism, emphasizing science as the ultimate source of knowledge. As a result, religion often carries connotations of superstition and illusion, as it may appear irrational and lacking empirical evidence. The questions posed by skeptics are emblematic: How can one explain the concept of a singular God existing as three distinct persons? Can science provide data on the existence of the human soul? How can one rationalize the notion of a "virgin birth"? I myself have not been immune to the influence of this prevailing ideology. At times, I too found my faith shaken by doubts. The apparent lack of logical coherence and concrete evidence made it difficult for me to reconcile these tenets within my rational framework.

In her essay *For the Love of Reason* [21]American philosopher Louise Antony makes the best illustration of this rationalist ideology which I think is necessary for me to know so as to prepare myself for my future ministry in China. In that essay, Antony described her journey from a "devout Catholic girl to an adamant atheist." Since her childhood, she has had trouble with the Catholic teaching of Limbo. She couldn't accept that God does not allow innocent and good people to enter heaven just because they do not fulfill the law of baptism. Her mother couldn't give her satisfactory answers and often impatiently replied: "You just think too much." Antony also had a problem understanding the Trinity. She guessed that the trinity was like a family, or a three-leafed clover, or three modes of God, yet a nun refuted all of them, told her it was a mystery of faith, and

[21]Louise M. Antony, "For the Love of Reason," *Philosophers without Gods*: *Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41–58.

dismissively said: "Just memorize your Catechism." Apart from her persisting confusion about the Catechism, the way adults responded added to her puzzlement and distress. They got irritated by her ongoing questioning, whereas, in school, teachers often encouraged all means to find solutions to problems, for curiosity was "the engine of all scientific achievement". She then asked: "Why in religion was I supposed to dumbly accept whatever the authorities told me?"

Later on, she encountered philosophy-the discipline of reason. Antony exclaimed: "Imagine my delight, then, when I discovered that philosophy was all about arguing! Not only was my constant questioning tolerated; it was positively encouraged." She surveyed the traditional arguments for the existence of God: that of Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, and William James, among others. Fighting "tooth and nail to make one of them work," however, she found none of them convincing enough. The last straw was the problem of evil, which drove away her last desire to believe in God. Antony said:

By the middle of my first semester (in college), I was experiencing a full-blown crisis of faith. I could not accept the possibility that my religious belief had no rational defense, especially not now after I'd fallen in love with a discipline devoted to rational defenses... I was angry: why were there no good answers? Why had God made it so difficult to make sense of His will? If He wanted us to believe, why had He made all the reason and evidence work against belief?

> Antony eventually gave up her faith, which freed her of the "obligation to avow propositions" she didn't understand and "of the struggle to make sense of doctrines that couldn't be made sensible." She said: "My only doxastic obligations henceforth would be to reason and evidence."

The essay depicts someone who persistently sought to understand her religious beliefs yet failed. Her complete confidence in reason made her reject any claims that were unable to pass the test of reason. For Antony, "faith presents a paradox: if a doctrine can be defended on rational grounds, then it needn't be taken on faith. But if it cannot be defended on rational ground, why should you believe it?"

Louise Antony gave me a glimpse on how atheists think about reality: how one ought to oblige only to reason and evidence. Radical, isn't it? But whether this principle is reasonable is dubitable for me. Why should the human mind be the final arbiter of truth and reality when we human beings are, after all, a minuscule component of a complex universe? No matter how great our reasoning capacity is and how advanced science has been, we can never escape this reality and observe it from a distance (as with one conducting an experiment). We are always part of the universe. What makes us so confident about our rationality?

Embracing an unwaveringly absolutist scientific perspective might seem to exclude discussions about the divine. From this viewpoint, human existence appears reducible to the intricate workings of neurons—products of a lengthy and chance-driven biological evolution, with the complexity of life stemming from countless genetic mutations. In this framework, emotions like joy, love, fear, and hope lose their mystique, reduced to chemical reactions between neurons. Elements like culture, morality, laws, and social etiquette are stripped of intrinsic value, functioning merely to sustain the mechanics of human society. Dreams, ambitions, ideals, and aspirations, once cherished, appear trivial, mere products of human amusement.Would anyone want to subscribe to such cold and brutal (if not meaningless) claims?

In his speech at Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI speaks about the modern self-limitation of reason and the danger of exulting science, which is essentially the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements, as the only criterion for certainty. He says: "if science as a whole is this and this alone, it is man himself who ends up being reduced."[22] So why do we want to reduce ourselves to a product of mechanical processes? After all, confidence in human reason and science may be treated as a set of religious beliefs as well, and one can ask if atheism itself can be verified. Where does atheism's credibility stand? I hope my fellow countrymen may critically evaluate their stance on this matter and ponder deeply about these questions.

## Reason as Faith Cultivating Itself

Atheism, as essentially a kind of belief, opens for me another inquiry: is there really a clear and distinct demarcation between reason and faith? Robin George Collingwood's writing helped me delve into this question. He paid a deeper look at Descartes' insight- *cogito, ergo sum*. Descartes reaches the certainty of his own existence (*ergo sum*), which he sees as the foundation of all other knowledge because he cannot deny that he is thinking (*cogito*). But how did he know what he was thinking? Collingwood then points out that this insight is an intuition with absolute certainty that "does not depend on proof, not even on indirect proof, but on the fact that it cannot be denied.[23]" Thus, Descartes had demonstrated a

[22]Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to München, Altötting and Regensburg: Meeting with the Representatives of Science in the Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg*, Papal Archive, September 11, 2006, The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

[23]R.G. Collingwood, "Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself," *Faith and Reason: Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 114.

breakthrough in the theory of knowledge that the "intuitive certainty is the foundation and source of all knowledge whatever." That intuitive certainty is nothing but faith.

Collingwood's insight helps dispel my occasional mistrust of the very act of believing. In my own experience of faith crisis, I would raise the question: why must I believe in something? Why can't I figure things out only through reasoning? Collingwood enlightens me to see that, in fact, all my knowing is grounded on the act of faith. I am certain that the external world exists-the computer in front of me, the study room I stay in, the people surrounding me, etc. I perceive their existence with an intuitive certainty; I simply take them for granted. No knowledge is possible if I keep on doubting the existence of the external world. This applies to my reasoning as well. I will not render any judgment if I am not certain that I am really reasoning or I exist.

However, intuitive certainty is to be distinguished from intellectual clarity. I am certain that the external world exists, but to know what it really is, I need to study and articulate it. Likewise, Collingwood claims that "every act is fundamentally an act of faith; but it is not a completed act of faith unless it develops into a rational and self-explanatory system of thought...all knowledge begins with an immediate, unreasoned, and indemonstrable conviction that there is something here to be known and goes on to ask what it is.[24]" Collingwood concludes by saying that: "Reason is nothing but faith cultivating itself.[25]" Through this perspective, I gain a more lucid understanding of science, often revered by contemporary atheists as the paramount authority of truth. Science initiates its journey grounded in the belief that something is ascer-

[24]Ibid.,119.

[25]Ibid.,121.

tainable, preceding the quest to unravel its essence. Newton's gravitational formula germinated from his observation of a falling apple; Darwin's theory of evolution was kindled by his intrigue regarding the varying attributes among distinct finch species. Based on this premise, can we similarly argue that faith in a higher power or religion commences with the foundational conviction that a supreme being can be known?

## Faith Awakened and Lived Out

For Collingwood, the answer to this question is yes. He holds that "Descartes has shown that our knowledge of our own existence is of exactly the same kind as the direct knowledge of God by faith"[26]. If this is so, why then are there still many who doubt God? Collingwood answers it by using the analogy of a child gaining self-consciousness. A child does not know that there is an "I" by birth; he comes to recognize the self by encountering others and reflecting on the experience. In a similar way, we become conscious of God by reflecting on the experience of our lives[27]- our encounter with the external world, with others, with our ups and downs, and – eventually and necessarily, I think – with the divine.

I have come to understand now that the wonder we talk about at the beginning of the study of philosophy (philosophy starts with wonder) is precisely an expression of that intuition of the divine. The consciousness of God is cultivated if one is able to reflect on that wonder instead of letting it slip away.

Liu Yang was a Chinese astronaut. On June 16, 2012, she became the first Chinese woman in space with two other

[26]Ibid.,114.

[27]Ibid.,116.

male colleagues aboard the Shenzhou-9 spacecraft[28]. After the mission, she was interviewed about her experience in space. She said: "I was astounded when seeing the earth from the spacecraft. I have learned about it; I have knowledge about it. But it is so different to see it there. She is really "Mother Earth," with flesh and life. Liu said that after returning, she became extra grateful for the many things taken for granted before, particularly for gravity - "the first time to wash my hands after returning, I stayed for quite a while. What a blessing it is, I realized, to have water flowing from the faucet.[29]" Can there be a better example to illustrate that awakened consciousness? In addition to this, Liu Yang is a member of the Chinese Communist Party, supposedly an atheist.

We do not have to go to outer space for that consciousness to be awakened. We wash our hands many times a day.

Building on Collingwood's point, Raymun Festin points out that religious consciousness is also cultivated and nurtured in a conducive environment, such as in a believing community[30]. It is in a believing community where faith is inherited and practiced that one develops a keener sense of God's presence in his life. Thus, faith is also to be lived. Looking back on my experience of faith crisis mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I see that it is precisely the support and wisdom of my novice master that helped me through it. As I move forward in formation, it is by persistently holding onto faith and reflect-

[28]BBC News, "Profile of Liu Yang, China's First Woman Astronaut," *BBC News*, June 16, 2012, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-18471236.

[29]Team, T. V. F. E.《杨澜访谈录》刘洋：回归地球的幸福_综艺_高清1080P在线观看平台_腾讯视频.. April 14, 2013, accessed March 21, 2023, https://v.qq.com/x/cover/7gz9iupvt3dh3x5/c0012wgj1h7.html.

[30]Raymund J. Festin, *The Black Nazarene and Philosophy* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc, 2017), 330.

ing on my faith experiences that I gain an increasing sense of the truthfulness of faith. Therefore, if philosophy is doing philosophy (supposedly said by Fr. Roque Ferriols as "*Sapagkat ang pilosopiya ay ginagawa*"), maybe I could say that to have faith is to live out faith: to confront doubts, to grapple with uncertainties, and to leave enough space for the Infinite and Beyond when reason falls short of giving answers. Such faith can flourish and be nourished within a community that may support, challenge, and eventually deepen one's convictions in life.

How then could I help my fellow countrymen in taking that leap of faith? Beyond presenting the reasonableness of faith, I believe it is essential to accompany them in understanding that faith serves as both the beginning and the way of their journey. It forms the very foundation upon which all knowledge rests and serves as the pathway to eventually arrive at the Reason beyond all reasons.

# DIAKONIA AS LIVED THEOLOGY

*Cosme Carlo A. Lacang, SJ*

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"*Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become.*
*Believe what you read, teach what you believe,*
*and practice what you teach.*"

With these words, the ordaining Bishop entrusts to the newly ordained deacon the Book of the Gospels and reminds him of the ministry which is committed to him in the service of God and the Church. In this exhortation, I believe, is found not just the formula for an authentic and fruitful diaconal ministry, but also the synthesis of Christian faith and the study of theology.

In the early days of the Church, narrated in Acts 6:1-7, the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit to choose seven men known for their wisdom and good repute to help them in the daily distribution of food, so that they could give themselves more fully to the ministry of the word and of prayer. Through the laying on of hands, these men were given the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit and were consecrated to the ministry of *diakonia*. Those called to this office of charity are to serve at the altar as "ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"[1] and to lead lives that build up the community through their works and witnessing. Deacons carry out their mission in the heart of the Church, always in communion with their particular bishops, the presbyterium, and other ministers, as made clear in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (no. 28), of the Second Vatican Council.

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[1]United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), vii. Hereafter USCCB.

To be both a student of theology and a minister of service has been a profound experience for me. My ordained ministry these past four months has been characterized by *Lumen Gentium*'s description of the tasks of deacons within the life of the faith community: "to administer Baptism solemnly; to protect and distribute the Eucharist, assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, bring Viaticum to the dying; read the Sacred Scriptures to the faithful, instruct and exhort the people; preside over the prayer and worship of the faithful, administer sacramentals, and officiate at funeral and burial rites."[2] What we see here is not a list of mere duties to fulfill, but grace-filled means by which the life of God is communicated to God's people. It is a deeply meaningful experience to be an instrument of making alive to the Christian community, through the ministry of service, what is learned in and upheld by theological formation. *Diakonia* is lived theology—theology as incarnated in the life of everyday Church. In this synthesis paper, I intend to reflect on the vital connections between *diakonia* and theology by exploring the three movements that are shared by these two—movements that touch on their source, meaning, and fulfillment.

## ***Believe what You Read*: Receiving from God**

In his homily during our ordination, Bishop Honesto Ongtioco of Cubao started with a reminder that the foundation of every vocation is a humble acknowledgment that all is a gift. Everything we have—our lives, our histories, our talents, our areas of growth, the people who surround us with support, and even our desire to give back through the vocations we have embraced—is a gift. The entrustment to the deacon of his new

[2]Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, no. 29.

ecclesiastical ministry, symbolized by the giving of the Book of the Gospels, is a grace he freely receives from the community of faith and, ultimately, from God. The minister's giftedness is based not so much on his academic achievements or his moral faultlessness, but on his being freely and lovingly called by the Lord. Our foundational identity is giftedness, made possible because we have a God who is effusive love. Our giftedness speaks not of our merits or worthiness, but of the sheer goodness and generosity of the divine Giver. The apt response to this giftedness is to have hearts that are ready to receive with humble gratitude.

The first movement in both *diakonia* and theology is that of receiving.

Our knowing and relating with God begins with God's initiative of revealing his innermost identity and his deepest desire to share with us his divine life. God is the main mover and sustainer in this relationship he has forged with us. His act of creation, for instance, was done not because of compulsion or out of necessity; God, in himself, is perfect and complete. His free act of bringing into being this good and sacred universe is a result of his love, the overflow of his perfection and completeness. That we are made in God's image and likeness means that we are made capable of beholding divine gifts and of receiving them with awareness and the capacity to engage in a relationship of reciprocity.

The central act of divine giving is God's revelation that God is a community of love. Whereas the deities of other nations were known for dominating their subjects through fear and apathetic disregard, the God of Israel revealed himself to be deeply immersed in the lives of his people and profoundly desirous to grant them liberation from all forms of oppression. Whereas deities were appeased through empty sacrifices,

God primarily sought a loving relationship with his people, made concrete their worthy offerings and made lasting their covenant, and repeatedly reminded the people through the prophets and kings who were anointed for this task. In all this, God gifted his people with the knowledge of who God is and the steady assurance that God is near to bless them.

The progression of God's self-revelation finds its fulfillment and fullness in Jesus Christ. In him is found everything there is to know about God. He who was with the Father (John 1:1-5) reveals the Father. From Jesus Christ, we receive true life in God: we receive him as a child in his incarnation, we receive from him an understanding of the reign of God through his preaching of the Kingdom, we receive healing and fellowship from him through his ministry to the poor, we receive him as the Eucharistic Lord who offers himself for us at the altar of the cross, and we receive him as the Risen One in whose resurrection is found the promise of our eternal destiny with God. In Jesus Christ, we receive access to the inner life of God: that God is a trinity of persons in perpetual self-manifestation and self-offering to one another, whose deepest joy is to have us share in this celebration of love. In the Christ-event, we receive the Gospel that God is the Father who is the source of all, that God is the Son who redeems through his self-offering, and God is the Spirit who animates and brings together.

*Believe what you read*. What we are invited to *read* is this entire history of divine self-revelation and self-giving which culminates in Jesus Christ, passed on from one generation of believers to the next through what is put down and actively shared in Scripture and Tradition. We are to *believe* in faith and surrender what we have freely received.

Often there is an emphasis on giving as a manifestation—even a proof—of loving. We are so used to jumping into action

to show our appreciation and gratitude for gifts received. However, the first movement of theology reminds us that our first call is to receive. In the act of humbly receiving, we place the preeminence back on the Giver as the one who calls forth and sustains; through the attitude of humbly receiving, we return to our identity as children.

### *Teach what You Believe*: Delighting in God

"Do you resolve to maintain and deepen the spirit of prayer that is proper to your way of life?" This is one of the questions the bishop asks the candidate during the ordination rite. The candidate's yes is his affirmation of the duty of the minister—, of all believers—to keep alive the gift of faith which one has received. Here, prayer is mentioned as a key element in fanning the flames of religious fervor. For deacons in particular, this exhortation is given: "The Church's work of praising God and interceding with Christ, and through him, with the Father, for the salvation of the whole world, is entrusted to deacons in the celebration of Ordination, in such a way that they are to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours on behalf of the entire people of God, indeed of the entire human race."[3] At the heart of this exhortation is the understanding that the important first movement of receiving ought to lead to delighting. The deacon/believer is invited to delight in what he has freely received, ever to keep these gifts in his heart and before his eyes.

The second movement in both diakonia and theology is that of delighting.

The very first chapter of Psalms declares as blessed those "whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on

[3]USCCB, *Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons*, no. 178.

his law day and night" (Psalm 1:2). Such a one follows the righteous path and is not tempted to follow the way of the wicked. More importantly, those who delight in the Lord are rewarded with a life of bounty and peace because he is near to God who is the source of all that is good. To delight in the Lord is to behold him and to remain in him. To delight in the Lord is to find light and joy in him.

Jesus Christ is the true light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) because he illumines for us the way to the Father and one another. This light he shares with and entrusts to the Church. Over the centuries, the Church has had many ways of expressing her self-understanding with the use of images: the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the community of disciples, etc. At the Second Vatican Council, she highlighted her identity as bearer of Christ who is *lumen gentium*, the light of nations. This powerful image communicates to her members and the rest of humanity her essential role of bringing Christ, the true light, to the world. She does not exist for herself; she is not to be equated to the Kingdom of God. She is to be the sacrament of God, the visible presence of Jesus Christ in the world, the means by which the Holy Spirit imparts divine life. She is missioned to bring the Gospel to all areas of human societies. She is to make use of all worthwhile means—dialogue, catechesis, social service—to make her proclamation credible and fruitful. As a community of faith in pilgrimage, she is to accompany her children in the way of continual conversion to more fully delight in the Lord.

The Second Vatican Council declares that the Church shares in the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties"[4] of the people of this age. With this, the faith community embraces all that

[4]Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. no. 1

is human and, as herald of Christ's Gospel, unites itself with all persons in their quest for true happiness. The Church does this by immersing herself in the real-life situations of people and by faithfully offering the message of Jesus Christ as the authentic path towards blessedness. She does this in keeping with her identity as the sacrament of salvation; She does this most efficaciously through the celebration of the seven sacraments entrusted to her by her Head. Each sacrament imparts grace that accompanies the faithful in his/her journey. Each sacrament imparts the divine life of the Lord who is the delight of every heart: baptism restores original grace and introduces one to the family of God; confirmation incorporates more fully the believer into the Church and fortifies him/her to become a more faithful Christian witness in the world; the Eucharist nourishes one with the very body and blood of Christ; confession reconciles the faithful to God and the community; matrimony celebrates the faithful and life-giving love among couples which mirrors the love Christ has for his bride; holy orders empower disciples to lead the community and be a special sign of evangelical witness; anointing of the sick consoles and brings inner healing. All these celebrate—with joy and light—the nearness of God.

Mary is the model of how it is to delight in the Lord. She, who carried the Word in her womb and pondered all things in her heart, who was mother to her Son throughout his ministry, who was present at the cross and the outpouring of the Spirit—she knows how it is to possess the light and joy of the Lord. This is what makes her truly blessed. She who is blessed teaches us to delight in the Lord who delights in gracing us.

### *Practice what You Teach*: Committing to God

"Do you resolve to hold fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience, as the Apostle urges, and to proclaim this faith in word and deed according to the Gospel and the Church's tradition?" Before being ordained, the candidate is asked to express his commitment to his new ministry. His assent binds him more closely to the way of Christ's self-giving love and service. He is to consistently manifest in his person, through his words and deeds, the faith of the Christian community. He is to be a credible representative of the Church and God, making the Christian way of discipleship attractive to others. From receiving and delighting, he is led to committing. The deacon/believer is invited to commit to what he has pondered in his heart and what he has beheld with his eyes.

The third movement in both *diakonia* and theology is that of committing.

For one to grow in maturity in the Christian faith, one is invited to progress from knowing about God into transforming his/her person to be profoundly of God. Commitment has two dimensions: the present and the eschatological.

Prophetically and always with the medicine of mercy, the Church works to reverse situations that disadvantage the least in society and prevents the realization of justice and genuine human progress. At present, the Christian believer is called to be heroic in his witness of Christian values, especially in the area of social justice. This is where we locate the Church's insistence on Catholic Social Teachings. These teachings and related papal exhortations have been very clear about the role of the faithful in society. Contrary to the prevalent belief that faith and politics are incompatible, the vocation of the Christian, we are taught, is to bring the values of Christ into

the temporal order. Pope Benedict, in addressing the Bishops of Paraguay in 2008, said, "A big part of the vocation of lay people is their participation in politics to bring justice, honesty, and defense of true and authentic values, and to contribute to the real human and spiritual good of society. The role of the laity... especially in politics, is key to the evangelization of society"[5]. If changes in the unjust structures of society are to be effected, especially in how policies are done, then the faithful have to embrace political involvement as a mission and as an integral part of their Christian identity. Pope Francis says that "politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity since it seeks the common good. We need to be convinced that charity is the principle not only of micro-relationships (i.e. family and friends), but also of macro-relationships (i.e. social, economic, and political ones)."[6] Because of their expertise and wider spheres of influence, the lay faithful are in prime positions to help in the Church's mission to reach out to the different sectors of society that still need the light of the Gospel. As the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines affirms: "The laity's field of evangelization activity covers the vast and complex world of education, politics, society, and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media."[7] When work in these secular fields is

[5]Pope Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness to Bishops of Paraguay on their Ad Limina 2008*, Speeches, 08 February 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080911_ad-limina-paraguay.html

[6]Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. no. 205

[7]PCP II, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1991), 434.

done with the guidance of the values of Christ and to provide authentic justice and liberation to all, then the reign of God is made more present in the here and now. There is, therefore, an urgent need for movement—regarding political involvement within the Church and especially among the laity—from apathy and fear to mission and participation.

Commitment has an eschatological dimension too. The work for evangelization affects not just the here-and-now of people, but has profound connections with our understanding of the ultimate destiny of all. If we commit to the belief that creation is called to journey back to God who is our true home and the fulfillment of our longings, then Christ's coming calls us to express our hoped-for communion with God in terms of our concrete commitments to the work of social justice and the liberation of the oppressed. This is so because our actions and ways of relating in the present affect God who is very much involved in and present to all of his beloved creatures, our manner of building up or destroying others and our communities in the present shape our experience of the eschatological gathering of all of creation, and the rule of God—which is his very being of love and communion—is manifested not just in the future, but equally so in our practical and day-to-day choices of making the divine life active and alive in the lives of people, especially in acts of *diakonia* for God's beloved poor.

# "GRANT ME ONLY TO LOVE YOU:" THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN LOVE IN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

*Michael George M. Villasis*

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The Contemplation to Attain Love (Latin: *Contemplatio ad Amorem*) is found in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as part of the Fourth Week and as a fitting conclusion of the entire Exercises. Because the Exercises serve to free the exercitant from disordered attachments, introduce one to the Christ of the Gospels, awaken the exercitant to the Love of God, and elicit the exercitant's response to him in freedom and gratitude,[1] the *Contemplatio* can be considered as a synthesis of the whole retreat. For Ignatius, the movement of the Exercises and the entire Christian life is one of development, an ever-deeper movement of freedom into the Love of God. The *Contemplatio* is also developmental: it leads to freedom from the hold of sin in one's life, a deeper consciousness and experience of this Love in all things, and in doing so, respond to this Love with love.

The *Contemplatio* mirrors, on the one hand, the faith we profess as Christians and, on the other, the exercitant's own personal development in love. Faith, as in the exercises, is trust and surrender to the one who is the source of Love and the giver of love's gift, which can only be done in love. Indeed, in my own journey in the Exercises, I experienced the *Contemplatio* as the culmination of the love and freedom of the long retreat and my whole formation journey. In nearing the end of my stay in San

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[1]The Exercises are composed of four Weeks, which consider, respectively, sin and mercy, Christ's life, his Passion, and his Resurrection, through which one is called to know Christ intimately and follow him in a deeper way.

Jose and gathering the fruits of my journey, I find more and more that this love in many places and through many people has its highest expression in my prayer of the *Contemplatio* – both in its aspect of consciousness and memory of this love, and of the begging of the grace to love God in return.

## Love as Doing and as Sharing – The Grace I Beg For

Before the *Contemplatio*, Ignatius gives two points regarding love. First: "Love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than words." Second: "Love consists in a mutual sharing of goods."[2] It sets the tone for the entire *Contemplatio*, for Love is now defined as doing and sharing. God's Revelation can be seen in such terms, because Revelation is not simply the manifestation of God's decrees, but God's self-communication of himself and his saving plan for us. God desires to reveal himself to us because of his surpassing love, which invites us to friendship and to share in his divine life. Indeed, this Love is enfleshed in words and deeds; the mighty deeds of God attest to his faithful and saving love.[3] As love reveals not just the lover's deeds, but also who the lover is, so too does God's revelation in history show who he is, a God who is always "being-with" and "being-for" – in creation, in covenant, and in the person of his Son, who perfects revelation, showing us the face of the God who is love.[4]

Love is sharing and involves mutuality. God's revelation is not one-sided; it is done so that we might know and draw closer to him and come to the fullness of life. Our response to this gift is faith. This response is not only an assent and acceptance of

[2]Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis Puhl (Makati: Saint Paul's, 1987), no. 231.

[3]Cf. *Dei Verbum* 2. Hereafter *DV.*

[4]See *DV* 2-4.

God's teachings as true. Instead, faith involves the entirety of the human person, involving entrusting one's self to God with the aid of the Spirit.[5] This faith allows us to enter into true freedom, for in allowing us to perceive Love, it is already the beginning of eternal life.[6]

Love as self-giving and mutuality can only be thus because God himself is Love. It is the Love of the Father and Son and Spirit, all mutually indwelling in each other, all giving of themselves to each other for all eternity. The love of the Trinity overflows into the world and us and draws us into this life through covenant and communion. Indeed, the *Contemplatio* mirrors the Trinity – the remembering and understanding of the working of love in us drives the will to love God in return – memory, understanding, will, and the image of the Trinity as perfect and eternal love.[7] It is why the grace begged for is the awareness and response to this eternal and mutual love: the interior knowledge of all graces received, "that in all things I may love and serve the Divine Majesty."[8]

## The First Point: Love as Giving

> This is to recall to mind the blessings of creation and redemption and the special favors I have received. I will ponder with great affection how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much He has given me of what He possesses...[9]

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[5]*DV* 5.

[6]Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 163. Hereafter *CCC*.

[7]See Erich Przywara, *Deus Semper Maior: Theologie der Exerzitien*, vol. II (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1964), 318.

[8]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 233.

[9]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 234.

In contemplating the first point, one calls to mind that God is the giver of every good gift. Thus, Love is manifested as giving and outpouring, not out of necessity or any return, but simply out of his loving will, which is the reason and foundation of self-giving.[10] In a personal way, I call to mind the many people whose love and generosity have helped me in my vocation: my family and friends, priests who served as witnesses to the priestly vocation, teachers who formed me intellectually and spiritually, and so many others. All of them are gifts of God to me; in them, I have experienced how God has wonderfully and lovingly made me and continues to remake me in his image and likeness.

Love as giving is manifested, especially in the gift of creation. For creation is not the product of random chance, on the one hand, or necessity, on the other. Creation can only stem from the overflowing self-giving of the Trinity, an outpouring of love into the created order. Creation is thus free because it is willed out of love, and continues to be sustained by love. It is good and orderly, coming from the goodness and solicitude of God. Hence, it is a gift.

Sin damages this gift. It is not simply breaking a rule that deserves punishment but the misuse of the great gift of creation and relationship. It breaks the mutuality of love that gives the beloved what one is and has and instead makes oneself the center and endpoint of all love. In sinning, one prefers oneself to God and desires to be like him *apart from him*. Thus, it damages the harmony of love with God and others, leading to more sin.[11]

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[10]Przywara, *Deus Semper Maior*, 320.

[11]Cf. *CCC* nos. 398-401.

Nevertheless, "how much more plentiful has been the grace of God..."[12] Despite our sins, God has not abandoned humanity to its own devices but has time and again offered himself to us in generous self-giving. In the history of Israel, he has shown that sin cannot be greater than grace; indeed, grace always abounds all the more. In continuing to guide his people, offering them his covenant, and making them his own people, God has shown that he is a God of grace, covenant faithfulness, and steadfast love: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and so I still maintain my faithful love for you."[13] The self-giving of God always calls to conversion, to turning back to Him in Love.[14]

The many human and spiritual formation modules have helped me recognize my issues, failings, and sins and how deeply these have affected me and others. Yet, more than this, the recognition of the ever-deeper mercy of God in my prayer and spiritual direction has led me to a deeper understanding that sin is not the final word. I am led beyond my issues and failings precisely because this greater love of God draws me to Himself.

## The Second Point: Love as Dwelling

> This is to reflect how God dwells in creatures... So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence; and makes a temple of me, since I am created in [his] likeness and image.[15]

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[12]Romans 5:15b (Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

[13]Jeremiah 31:3

[14]See *Spiritual Exercises* no. 60, the "cry of wonder" at God's mercy in spite of sin.

[15]Ibid., no. 235.

Love is not just giving but also "being with." The God of Love dwells in the created order and myself, created in his image and likeness. This indwelling in me is grace - God's gift of his life to me.[16] This grace is incarnated in the person of his Son, the eternal Word, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.[17] In Jesus, we see the merciful face of the Father; in Jesus, God became like us to restore what was lost through sin and share his life with us. We are not the ones reaching out to God, but God is reaching out to us and inviting us to answer his call, the call to know him, love him, and follow him in a personal manner.[18] This friendship with Jesus is foundational – in my vocation, I have found that this is the one thing that matters, that the rest of my formation is hinged on this personal knowledge of Jesus as someone utterly close to me. Especially in the practice of examen and contemplation, I have found that Jesus dwells with me and in me, sharing in my life. He constantly calls me to a greater and deeper relationship with him, so much so that this familiarity is no longer abstract but concrete. The person of Jesus Christ, in whom God has shown his absolute nearness, becomes the anchor on which the meaning of my life and mission is based.

Indeed, the entire life of Jesus Christ is one of God's intimate closeness to humanity. In becoming like us in all things except sin, he came to bring the Good News. In inaugurating the Kingdom of God, he showed the face of the merciful God. In seeking the lost sheep, Jesus shows the extent of God's saving power. Christian love thus finds its meaning and source in this

[16]Cf. *CCC*, no. 1999.

[17]John 1:14

[18]*Spiritual Exercises*., no. 104.

radical form of love.[19] In Jesus, Love becomes the meaning and truth of human existence.[20]

The dwelling of God in the world through his Son is not done by violating our freedom to accept or reject his love. God so respects human freedom that his saving plan hinges upon human cooperation – and thus, Mary's yes in the history of salvation is paramount. Mary, full of grace by virtue of her Son's saving action, cooperated in this plan of salvation with all her heart and being. She became the first of those who would accept God and follow him to the utmost, though it meant standing at the foot of the Cross and giving all up. In her *Suscipe*, Mary becomes the Mother of all those who, in following God in humble discipleship to the point of self-sacrifice, offer all up. In such a one, God indeed dwells.

## The Third Point: Love as Labor

> This is to consider how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, He conducts Himself as one who labors... He gives being, conserves them, confers life and sensation, etc.[21]

God does not only create and dwell in his creation, for God is thoroughly involved and at work in the world. This is given a particular emphasis in the Third Point, for it shows Love as doing and suffering, a Love that labors.[22] On the Cross, Jesus is stretched out "to the end" of loving;[23] such a self-giving Love makes us whole again. The Triune Love of God is shown at its

[19]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.

[20]Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 208.

[21]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 236

[22]Cf. Michael J. Buckley, "The Contemplation to Attain Love," *The Way* Supplement 24 (1975):102.

[23]Cf. John 13:1

utmost; God has given himself to the fullest extent of love, plunging into the depths of human suffering and pain. God has "entered into our loneliness and embraces us there with the outstretched arms of the Crucified."[24] Thus, on the Cross, what is revealed is God at his utmost, who is "not simply absolute power, but absolute love."[25] This love is our redemption precisely because it is God's absolute and overflowing love, a love that is total surrender.

The suffering love of God is something I experience not only for humanity, *pro multis*, but for my own good and salvation, *pro me*. It is personal and intimate, done out of love for me, so I may be led to a new life with him and come to love him, too. In experiencing the passion, I am strengthened to bear patiently and lovingly whatever sufferings I encounter because I know he has gone before me and that I can bear all out of love, just like him.

In experiencing the suffering love of God, I also recall my experiences of the suffering love of many people. I especially remember the families of patients in my hospital exposure during the SPFY. I saw God in the faces of the many family members who "co-suffered" with their suffering loved ones, taking care of them, finding financial support, praying, and hoping for better days. In this, I saw the cross of love and suffering and experienced the stretching out of love to its very end. If such is human love, how much more is God's love in Jesus Christ?

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[24]Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 241.

[25]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 28.

### The Fourth Point: God, the Source of Love

> This is to consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, justice, goodness, mercy, etc., descend from above as the rays of light descend from the sun...[26]

The final point of the *Contemplatio* considers not just God's effects but God as the source. From the experience of Jesus in temporal history, the emphasis is now on the experience of Jesus, "who is now the Lord and Christ," who now abides with us through his Spirit.[27] And thus, everything that comes from him is not only good but an expression of his inner goodness and Love – there is a movement and development in the person from love because of God's gifts to love that rejoices "simply in who [God] is."[28] The person is drawn into God's very being.

The obedient and self-giving Love of Jesus does not end in death. In obedience to the point of death, Love proves itself stronger than pain and suffering, and in being raised by the Father, Jesus is shown to be victor over death. For us who await our own resurrection from our sins, pains, and suffering, the resurrection of Jesus is given as a promise: we too will be drawn back to the Source of all Love, and we too will pass over from death to new life, we too shall be raised, for Love has shown itself to be all-powerful.

The presence of the Risen Jesus continues in his Spirit, whom he promised to send to us to teach us and glorify him.[29] In the Spirit, the God who gives, who dwells, and who labors does not end his relationship with the world but continues to

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[26]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 237.

[27]Buckley "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 103.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Cf. John 16:13-14.

animate his Church as the Source of Love, for "the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us."[30] Through the Spirit, we can know God as Love and love him in return, for the Spirit, in our weakness, aids us, and himself "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."[31]

## "Grant Me Only to Love You"

After each point in the *Contemplatio,* Ignatius asks the exercitant to reflect and see what response one ought to have at the awareness and experience of such a great love. And then, the exercitant is invited to pray the *Suscipe*, the prayer of self-offering:

Take, Lord, all my freedom. Receive my whole memory, understanding, and will. Whatever I have or own, you have given me. I hand it all back to you, and surrender it entirely, to be governed by your will. Grant me only to love you, give me this grace. This, truly, is enough for me.[32]

The final line is often translated as "give me only your love and grace," but it can also be translated, as shown above, to mean that the exercitant begs not for love for his sake, but for God's love to love God in return.[33] The dynamics of the *Suscipe* is thus made clearer – in recognizing that God sustains all things, the exercitant surrenders all things to him, content that God's will in all things is Love, and that loving him in all things is the only thing that matters. The mutuality of love mentioned

[30]Romans 5:5.

[31]Romans 8:26 (Revised Standard Version).

[32]David Coffey, "The Ignatian *Suscipe* Prayer: Its Text and Meaning," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* Vol. 5 Issue 4 (Nov 2018), 529. https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00504002.

[33]See Coffey, "The Ignatian *Suscipe* Prayer," 525-526.

earlier becomes true, and the friend of Christ[34] is now drawn into the self-giving love of the Trinity. However, this *Suscipe* is not once-for-all but ever-new: each new act of recognition deepens this self-oblation and draws us nearer to this Love.

In this lifelong process and journey of faith, of an ever-new and ever-greater *Suscipe*, I have discovered that I am not alone. The faith I have received is indeed received, celebrated, and deepened in the context of a community, for Love shared with God cannot be shared with others. This community is not just San Jose but the entirety of Christ's Church, which is not only a human community but infused with Christ's presence through the Spirit of his Love. It is the "sacrament of salvation,"[35] continuing Christ's mission in the world. The Church exists for the sake of the mission, just as I, having experienced the love of God in its effects and in God myself, can commit myself to love and serve God in all things.

This Faith is celebrated in the worship of the Church, in which Jesus makes his loving action present. In offering himself to the Father in his Incarnation and most especially in the Paschal Mystery, Jesus inaugurated true worship to the Father: God, in Jesus Christ, reaches out to us in a definitive, final way. The worship of the Church is thus God's saving work, and this salvation is made present to us in a tangible, grace-filled manner.[36] And in turn, as in the *Suscipe*, we are involved in this self-giving love – we participate in that self-offering and true worship to the Father in offering our lives together with Jesus. Our lives thus become an offering of love to him whose love has enabled us to be children of the Father.

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[34]Cf. *Spiritual Exercises* no. 224. This is the first time the exercitant is referred to in this way. See Buckley, p. 104.

[35]*Lumen Gentium,* 48.

[36]Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

In the *Suscipe,* the human love of the exercitant, no matter how imperfect, is drawn into the eternal and ever-greater love of God, who holds everything in his hands. It is the hope of the Christian – a hope that, in the end, God will not just save him or her. Rather, Christian love which "hopes all things"[37], hopes for the salvation of the entire world, of the whole created order, not through our own efforts but through God's mercy. Such hope is not presumption but wholehearted trust in the Love of the One who has shown himself as a saving God. Our *Suscipe* on this earth is grounded on hope, and its fulfillment is in the eternal Love in heaven.

## To Love in All Things

The Contemplation to Attain Love aims at the integration and unity of the love of God: in the person, in all things used in service to God, between God and the person, and in the whole of the Exercises. It reaches its purpose when this integration is such that the person can love God in all things.[38] "The giving of God evokes the giving of man, and in this mutual surrender, they become one in their love. They become interchangeably lover and beloved."[39] To love him in all things is a lifelong process of integration, assisted by grace, which culminates in the union of love with Love for all eternity. The *Contemplatio* thus becomes the lens by which one views the movement of one's life – including and especially one's Faith and vocation.

My journey in San Jose is also a journey in this integration. But it is not simply an integration of my interior self, but the integration of love mentioned above. In my seeking and understanding of God, the source of all Love, I have slowly moved

[37]1 Cor. 13:7 (Revised New Jerusalem Bible).

[38]Buckley "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 98.

[39]Ibid., 99.

from seeing God in his effects on me to God as he is in himself. In San Jose, I have recognized and accepted not only God's gifts (and how hard it is to accept these!) and his dwelling and working in me, but also God who is himself goodness and love and draws me to himself because of this love.

Entering the seminary, I had many ideals for myself and my vocation, but I have found that I have often fallen short of these. I have relied on my power too often, trusted in my abilities, and too often, these have failed me. Looking back, I realize these were attempts, on the one hand, to control my own vocation and, on the other, to refrain from responding because of my feelings of unworthiness. But God's Love, manifested to me in San Jose, has shown me another way, indeed the only way. It is the way of openness to his grace. It is the awareness that everything comes to me as a gift, not out of my own worthiness, but simply because of God's goodness. It is the understanding that God continues to labor for and in me. And especially in the long retreat, it is ultimately the profound experience of being loved, saved, and called, simply because he is Love.

My self-offering to him every day and my commitment to him towards priestly ministry is rooted in this recognition of God's ever-present love; it is only in this love that my self-offering makes sense. In recognizing the giver instead of gifts, I can set aside the gifts and fling myself into his hands because I know he is Love. And in loving him, I can adequately use these gifts not for their own sake but to "praise, reverence, and serve God."[40]

This Love of God has taken flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son through whom God has saved the world and thus has shown us the fullness of love. To love God in

[40] *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 23.

all things is thus not a love of our own making but is anchored on God's love, which, through the weeks of the Exercises, has taught the person how to love and so evokes human love in turn.[41] Ultimately, this is the only thing that makes sense, the only thing that matters; in a love that is personal, self-giving, and self-sacrificing, all things can be understood and find fulfillment. Everything else shall pass away, yet "faith, hope, and love abide, the three of them, but the greatest of these is love."[42]

[41]Cf. Buckley, "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 95-96.

[42]1 Cor. 13.

## Appendix

***Suscipe***

Sa simula't sapul,
Ikaw na at Ikaw.

Minahal ako't inalagaan,
pinaligaya ang mga araw,
minasdan ang paglaki't pagkatuto
pinuspos ng pagpapalang sumasaibayo.

At malugmok man at mawala,
ang pag-ibig Mo ang mag-aadya,
hinango sa dilim ng kasalanan,
inako ang lahat-lahat sa pagmamahal.

Ikaw pa rin ang siyang tumawag,
marahang sininagan ng Iyong liwanag.
Ikaw nga't Ikaw ang pinagmulan,
Ikaw rin nawa ang kahihinatnan.

Ibinigay Mo'ng lahat, kaya't ano'ng ganti
kundi ang paghahandog ng aba kong sarili?
'Di man sasapat ang buo kong diwa,
tatanggapin Mo'ng lahat at ikatutuwa,
sapagkat ibinigay ng isang pusong
puspos ng pasasalamat sa pag-ibig Mo.

Muling tanggapin ang lahat ng galing sa 'Yo
at patnubayan ayon sa kalooban Mo.
Ang pagmamahal lamang ay ipagkaloob,
at ito na'y kayamanan kong lubos-lubos.

*(Written during the Long Retreat in 2019)*

**Pag-aalay ng Sarili**
**(*Oblatio Sui*)**

Kunin, Panginoon,
ang buo kong kalayaan.
Tanggapin ang gunita ko, at ang isip,
maging ang buong kalooban.
Anumang hawak at taglay,
gayun din ang inaangkin,
malugod mong bigay ang lahat sa akin.

Lahat din at buong-buo
ang ibabalik sa Iyo;
patnubayan mo na ang lahat
ayon sa loob Mo.

Ang ibigin ka -
tanging iyan lamang ang ipagkaloob,
'pagkat ang biyayang iyan
ay yaman ko nang lubos-lubos.

***(Personal translation of the* Suscipe *in Filipino)***

# CONTRIBUTORS

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