

Ecclesia of Women
as
Synodal Third Space

Edited by

Kochurani Abraham

and

Christine Burke

ECCLESIA OF WOMEN AS SYNODAL THIRD SPACE
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DEDICATION

To all women who are committed to building an inclusive and egalitarian synodal Church.

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Since this book is the outcome of the presentations made at the eleventh biennial conference of Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), we want to place on record the efforts put in by the coordinating team of EWA XI under the leadership of Dr Rachel Sanchez, for all the meticulous planning and steps initiated in view of the meaningful execution of this event. A special word of thanks to Dr Marinda Keng-Fan Chan, the secretary of EWA XI for painstakingly organizing this event at Macao from June 26–30, 2024, paying keen attention to every detail for its successful accomplishment.

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The Editors

Introduction

Kochurani Abraham and Christine Burke

The very title of the book *Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space* might arouse curiosity and wonder with regard to its significance as each word is charged with meanings that defy clear cut definitions. This title could also raise critical questions in view of the connotations associated with the expression “ecclesia of women” and the challenges this could pose to the way of being church today.

Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space calls for expanding the set frontiers of perception. Knowledge making becomes an exciting adventure when it pushes the established boundaries of the given and treads into the unfamiliar and uncharted paths. It demands going beyond the settled foundations of the known into open-ended and often unrecognized and unacknowledged fields with awareness in order to gather the seeds of wisdom that are scattered on the grounded realities of life. This is precisely what is attempted through the pages of this book, which invites the reader to move beyond the “comfortable” spaces of the established theological knowledge and venture into the new and unexplored realms of understanding.

The dynamics of theologizing that unfold through the chapters of this book demand a better grasp of the context from which this work has emerged. This calls for a better comprehension of Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), the praxis of synodality, and what we mean by a “Third Space.”

Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) as the Grounding Field

The notion of “Ecclesia of Women” becomes intelligible when set against the backdrop of Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), which is a collective

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of feminist theologians in the Asian setting. In 2001, a sense of disturbance at the meager presence of women in theological knowledge-making spaces led a few theologians who had gathered for an Asian conference to ask some critical questions about this shadow reality of the church. Drawing inspiration from Karl Rahner, they coined the expression “Ecclesia of Women in Asia” to create a platform that would help Asian women exercise their ecclesial agency. In a historic attempt to make Asian Catholic women seen and heard in the sphere of theology, fifty-five women theologians from all over Asia gathered at the WE-Train International House in Bangkok, Thailand, for a five-day conference (November 24–29, 2002) entitled “Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced.”¹ This was the birthing moment of EWA.

The creation of EWA was envisioned as a platform for the development of theology from Asian women’s perspectives. EWA was initiated on the conviction that it could facilitate the recognition of theological agency of Asian Catholic women within the church and the academy. Thus, EWA emerged from the assertion that women are church and always have been church and so they want to enter the mainstream church as fully responsible ecclesial participants and partners in the life of the church.² Based on this conviction, the mission of EWA was spelled out as a move to encourage and assist Catholic women in or from Asia to engage in research, reflection, and writing towards theologizing that is inculturated and contextualized in Asian realities. This theologizing by Asian Catholic feminist theologians was to be built on the religious experience and praxis of the socially excluded; promote gender mutuality and the integrity of creation; and foster dialogue with other disciplines, faiths, or religions.³

To realize this ambitious mission, EWA brings together for its biennial conferences Catholic women and other feminist theologians from

¹ “EWA’s Herstory,” *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2017/05/19/ewas-herstory/.

² “Home,” *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com.

³ “Constitution and By-Laws,” *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/about/constitution-by-laws/.

ecumenical settings who engage with liberative theological questions. This is done from the standpoint of the academy and grassroots commitments to evolve a theology that responds to the signs of the times and to contextual concerns. The proceedings of these conferences are published regularly. This present work is yet another contribution to this series.⁴

The Significance and Challenges of the Church Becoming Synodal

Since the main thesis of this book is the assertion that “ecclesia of women” is a “synodal third space,” it is imperative to position this work within the broader canvas of synodality. For this, we examine first what is meant by synodality and how this notion has emerged in the Catholic thinking.

At a ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops in 2015, the late Pope Francis in his address spoke about the need for strengthening cooperation in all areas of the church’s mission as a demand of the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve even with its contradictions. In this setting, Francis made a ground-breaking declaration that it is “the path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁵

Certainly, the obvious question would then be: What is the “path of synodality?” For the Catholic Church, which has been functioning over the ages in a hierarchically-structured and clericalized mode of leadership, the notion of synodality is apparently paradoxical as it literally means that the whole church journeys together in an inclusive manner. While there have been synods of bishops since Vatican II, most Catholics are not familiar with the word ‘synodality’ even though there have been many councils and gatherings of theologians and bishops at various times in church history. But the call for the church to become a synodal church,

⁴ For a list of EWA publications, visit ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/books-by-the-ecclesia-of-women-in-asia/.

⁵ Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

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which involves all the baptized and which has strong implications for the way of exercising ecclesiastical leadership, is something new. However, a reading of the earliest sources also tells us that in the Council of Jerusalem, outlined in Acts 15, the momentous decision about reaching out to the Gentile community was made in a synodal way, as the disciples listened to the experiences of Paul and Peter and were prepared to adapt and change their mindsets about Gentiles becoming Christians.

The 2018 document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* by the International Theological Commission makes it explicit that “synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.”⁶ Further, the document reiterates that “the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church.”⁷

Understanding the church as the “People of God” has been a major turning point in the ecclesiology that has evolved with the Second Vatican Council.⁸ All the same, the Catholic Church has continued to function for the most part on an exclusively male, clericalized mode of exercising leadership, particularly in its pastoral life and mission. Against this backdrop, the notion of the synodal church as a “Church of participation and co-responsibility” is a major breakthrough as it makes clear in an unambiguous manner that in exercising synodality, the church is called to “give expression to the participation of all, according to each one’s calling.”⁹

⁶ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, no. 6, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

⁷ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 7.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

⁹ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 67.

Since “participation and co-responsibility” are meant to be the grounding features of the synodal church, it is important to ask what is signified by this “co-responsibility.” Would this mean that every baptized member with a Christian commitment, whether male, female, married, or single trans-person, or those belonging to sexual minorities and gender non-conforming groups share in the mission of the Church, taking responsibilities of leadership and service in every aspect of mission? Would new structures evolve in the Church that would make possible for persons who are imbued with the Spirit of God and with sufficient training to take responsibility for ecclesial life and mission? This question is all the more pertinent as the document on synodality affirms: “participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

Perhaps we can find a clue for comprehending what is implied by this participation and co-responsibility in the working document for the continental stage of the synodal process titled “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent (Is 54:2).”¹¹ The metaphor of the tent is subversive as it challenges the dominant hierarchical structuring of the church. Paying heed to the call to enlarge the space of the tent can alter the DNA of the church. It has the potential to recast an average Catholic from the *homo hierarchicus* or the hierarchical human who upholds a kyriarchal religious structure to a person capable of exercising spiritual/theological agency by virtue of his or her baptismal agency. The metaphor of the tent invites a radical re-imagination of the way of being church, going beyond dogmatized pyramidal power structures that are once and for all established, to organizational patterns that can change in response to the needs of the times while being at the service of the Reign of God. The “tent” imagery invites conversations that can facilitate egalitarian relationships among the

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 67.

¹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage, October 2022, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf.

baptized and an active engagement of the faithful in realizing the mission of the church in today's world.¹²

It is within this broader setting of synodality, where the Christian faithful as the people of God participate and exercise co-responsibility for “enlarging the space of our tent” as church, that we situate the “ecclesia of women” as a “synodal third space.” We take “ecclesia of women” as a catalyst for the creation of a more inclusive church that is grounded in the complexities and fluidities of life in the diverse contexts of Asia or the world today.

The Implications of a Synodal “Third Space”

As social theorists observe, spatiality is an important tool for exploring into the demarcations of human geography.¹³ Human beings inhabit social spaces, but social space is not something natural or given; it is a social product.¹⁴ Space is not a passive locus of social relations but a contested site, embedded in the center-periphery relation in an oppositional manner through all forms of binary logic.¹⁵ There are beneficiaries of space, just as there are those excluded from it and those deprived of it. Power relations are embedded in space. Hegemony makes use of space in the establishment, on the basis of an underlying logic which makes it desirable for some and undesirable for others.

¹² See Kochurani Abraham, “Are We a Listening Church?” in *Synodality: An Indian Theological Reflection*, ed. Edwin Rodrigues (ATC Publishers, 2024), 51–74.

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Blackwell, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (Verso, 1991).

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre calls social space a social product, but according to him, the act of production of social space is a process. For it to occur, it is necessary for the society's practical capabilities and sovereign powers to have at their disposal special places: political and religious sites. Cf. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26–34.

¹⁵ The binarized categories such as subject-object, mental-material, global-local, agency-structure, colonizer-colonized, white-black, man-woman, majority-minority are all spatial representations of power. See Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Blackwell, 1996), 89–90.

In seeking a spatial perspective within the framework of critical feminist thought, it is important to consider how gender relations are constructed and negotiated spatially.¹⁶ Women's space is marked out by the gendered spatial strategies of a society as defined by its socio-political, economic, and religious ideologies.¹⁷ The hegemonic construction of "femininity" in religion informed by patriarchal ideology, and the consequent exclusion of women from religious leadership and decision making, is illustrative of spatial practices organizing religious spaces.

The notion of "third space" becomes appealing for women when set against the backdrop of spatial politics that informs gender relations in diverse contexts. Third space is all the more attractive because it is considered "a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance"¹⁸ and so, it is applicable to the different locations that women find themselves in. Seen from this perspective, third space becomes potentially a transformative space, that which facilitates redefining of roles and structures which are restrictive. For women, this is very appealing as it could help evolve a new meaning to their being and doing. Third space becomes for women a liminal space, a threshold to venture into the new, into the unknown, while creating new paths.

The notion of "third space" makes possible the realization of the synodal call for "Enlarging the Space of Our Tent." This Working Document for the Continental Stage explains the liberative significance of

¹⁶ Seemanthini Niranjana's enquiry into how spatial considerations figure in the constitution of femininity has led her to conclude that gendered bodies are at once spaced and spacing. See Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization, and the Female Body* (Sage, 2001).

¹⁷ Lefebvre explains the way femaleness is assigned a limited portion of space and reduced to a "femininity" which is subordinated to the principle of masculinity using the phallic imagery. He finds the alliance between Ego and Phallus expressed in the verticality, political arrogance, and feudalism of towers occupying the central city space. The Phallus, a symbol of power and fecundity takes the space of God, of Father, or of a Leader producing spaces for whatever serves its purpose by force, violence, and power. This space, no longer the space of cryptic signs, becomes rather the space of the written word, the rule of history, of military violence, and hence a "masculine space." See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 261–262.

¹⁸ Soja, *Third Space*, 57.

the tent metaphor as a space of communion, a place of participation, and a foundation for mission. Within this space, listening becomes an expression of “openness to welcome,” which starts from a desire for radical inclusion—no one is excluded. The application of the tent imagery to the synodal Church takes diversity as a precondition for welcoming (no. 28). Diversity is the authentic base of a synodal church and the theological foundation of a unity which is capable of resisting the push toward homogenization. This enables us to continue to promote and make good use of the variety of charisms that the Spirit, with unpredictable abundance, pours out on the faithful (no. 9). This is “a path of recognition for those who do not feel sufficiently recognized in the Church” (no. 32).

The document “Enlarging the Space of Our Tent” further argues that “instead of behaving like gatekeepers trying to exclude others from the table, we need to do more to make sure that people know that everyone can find a place and a home here” (no. 31). This observation is made in the light of the reports presented in the working document, which point to the persistence of structural obstacles, including: hierarchical structures that foster autocratic tendencies, a clerical and individualistic culture that isolates individuals and fragments relationships between priests and laity, socio-cultural and economic disparities that benefit the wealthy and educated, and the absence of “in-between” spaces that foster encounters between members of mutually separated groups (no. 33).

Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) takes cognizance of this absence of “in-between” spaces and commits itself to the creation of fields or platforms that would help realize the praxis of synodality in the Asian context. As made explicit in the Call for Papers of the EWA XI conference, in lieu of the *status quo*,

Women are clamoring for a listening, dialogical, and serving church that is a non-hierarchical communion of a “discipleship of equals” marked by mutuality, relationality, and inclusivity. Leadership in the Church needs to be redefined in ways that are empowering to women. Small communities and liminal spaces emerging from local contexts and from

below demand recognition and mainstreaming. A feminist/womanist transformation of the Church can lead to a more discerning and imaginative way of being Church, that is more vibrant, authentic, just, and totally at the service of the Reign of God.¹⁹

Against this backdrop, EWA envisages the Ecclesia of Women as a synodal *third space* that redefines synodality from below and from the perspective of the excluded. A *third space* is an *in-between* space for those who seem to fall into the cracks of mainstream or officially recognized spaces. It is a space of negotiation, where women negotiate and subvert power as ecclesiastical citizens in their own right, their convictions emerging from their baptismal consecration as members of the Church. They do this taking commitment to justice and inclusive relationships as integral dimensions of their faith and exercising their ecclesial agency by mediating healing and a sense of belonging to those who have been marginalized and excluded by systems of religious power, mediated officially through the sacramental life of the church. The “in-between space” is a site for negotiating nationhood, community interest, and cultural values, and is thus also a site of hybridity.

The attempts by EWA to crystallize the vision of a “synodal third space” is what we see unfolding through each chapter of this book. We see Asian women with feminist theological sensibilities seeing themselves as journeying companions to the marginalized and excluded and speaking out on their behalf after engaging in active listening to their overt and covert voices. Exercising their ecclesial agency, “ecclesia of women” assume co-responsibility for participating in the church’s synodal life, which “presents itself, in particular, as *diakonia* in the promotion of a social, economic, and political life of all peoples under the banner of justice, solidarity, and peace.”²⁰ In addition, this book results from an ecumenical

¹⁹ “EWA XI Call for Papers: Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space,” *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/.

²⁰ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 119.

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commitment, which, as pointed out in the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, “marks out a journey involving the whole People of God” with “openness to each other in order to demolish the walls of diffidence which have separated Christians from each other for centuries and in order to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches that unite us as gifts of the one Lord in virtue of the baptism we share . . . witnessing to the Gospel to serving the poor and outcasts, from commitment to a society of justice and solidarity to a commitment to peace and the common good.”²¹

This book is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the *Theological Underpinnings of Ecclesia of Women as a Synodal Third Space*. In this section, Monica J. Melanchthon, a Lutheran feminist theologian, brings a fresh eye to the topic in her keynote address. Speaking from outside the Catholic tradition, she explores ideas associated with synodality and third space but then moves to a creative juxtaposition of two texts—one a film, heavy with the pain and finality of moving out from oppression, the other a text from Jeremiah: Rachel lamenting her children. For exercising agency as “synodal third space,” Melanchthon reclaims the power of naming what is wrong and finding in God the compassion and challenge to move forward.

Judette Gallares in her keynote lays the theological foundations of “synodal third space” by grounding this in the role of women in the Upper Room. In this Cenacle space, the birthing space of the church, with the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples in the presence of Mary and her companions, we see the seeds for the emergence of “ecclesia of women” that has a special mission of bringing to birth the synodal church in the world today. In a similar vein, Nelavala Gnana Prasuna, a Lutheran pastor who approaches synodality from outside the Catholic tradition, takes Mary, who urges Jesus to begin his mission in John’s story of the wedding at Cana, as an archetype of women initiating the synodal way of being

²¹ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 115.

church today. Prasuna sees Mary through the eyes of Dalit women in India who are on the edge, or more accurately, at the lowest rungs of the gender and caste hierarchical pyramid. Taking her own story and that of a Dalit woman bishop as cases that testify to the many the possibilities that can be realized when women step into new roles of leadership, she argues that the Catholic Church should be reading the signs of the times and ordaining women for ministry.

Women Birthing a Synodal Church by Exercising Agency in the “Third Space” is the focus of the second part of the book. Sharon A. Bong celebrates the “third space” of Catholic Women Preach, an online platform for Catholic women to exercise their spiritual agency through preaching as this space is denied for them in the regular circumstances of pastoral ministry. In the weekly series of homilies given by Catholic women across the globe, Bong sees Catholic women reclaiming their priestly, prophetic, and ruling roles bestowed on them by virtue of their baptismal consecration and, in so doing, exercising which she terms as women exercising a “feminist genius.” This notion of “feminist genius” replaces the idea of “feminine genius” attributed to women by the Catholic magisterium, which exalts them for their ‘feminine’ roles as caring and self-sacrificing sisters and mothers within a gender-stereotyped framework. On a similar note, Metti Amirtham examines the experiences, challenges, and contributions of Indian Catholic women, using a feminist theological lens to analyze the gap between the ideal of synodality and the gendered realities women face in India. Building on the notion of women as “an engine of synodality” as pointed out by Sr. Nathalie Becquart, she argues that since women are already walking the synodal path, the church in India can evolve into a participatory, egalitarian, and inclusive institution by recognizing their contributions.

Helen Romero’s reflections on this topic emerges from a woman’s personal experience of exclusion and confusion pain, having found meaning and love in a lesbian relationship, after living through a painful, abusive marriage. Romero raises critical questions about the synodal way of being church when this woman and others find themselves in similar

obscure and complex situations and face the risk of meeting with condemnation though they know that they are loved unconditionally by God. In her opinion, this calls for revisiting the understanding of God's mercy and grace and its implications for what it means to be a synodal Church.

Xiaoping Guo, in her review of the significant role women have historically played in nurturing faith within the Catholic Church in China, asserts that women continue to be agents of faith formation for the key roles they play in families for keeping faith alive. Identifying synodal signposts in the way women exercise agency as formators of faith in the Chinese and Tibetan churches, Guo argues that these are important indicators of their contribution for realizing synodality. Christine Burke's chapter also identifies a place where women are creating a "synodal third space" as she reflects on her experiences of educating seminarians on synodality. In the challenges and rewards of initiating the seminarians to a synodal understanding of church, she argues that the notion of synodality can move from being an arcane term to a way of being a sacrament of God's love in daily lives. In the light of her experiences, she invites theologians to look attentively at the ways that ordinary people fulfill their mission in everyday life so that synodality becomes a lived experience for all.

The third part of the book focuses on *Synodal Church Beyond Ecclesial Spaces*. In this section, Marinda Keng Fan Chan seeks to voice the importance of synodality, a way of listening and journeying with each other from the ground, particularly among women in grief. Taking the cases of two women living in Macao who were separated from loved ones at the time of their deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic, she advocates for an integrated approach to managing grief in a synodal spirit and invites local churches to become communities, journeying companions that accompany persons in their experience of grief. The reflections of Kristin Meneses and Megawati Naibaho on synodal experiences beyond ecclesial spaces come from the Indonesian context. Delving into the lived experiences of select Indonesian women with disabilities within the church and larger society, Meneses and Naibaho addresses dis/ableism taking into

account the absence and erasure of those with disabilities from discourse and praxis. Setting dis/ableism within the framework of the Catholic Church's commitment to the synodal path, they challenge the church to re-evaluate its position on people with disabilities, making the ecclesial setting a welcoming and hospitable space for all.

Marnie Racaza and Bernadine Lanot take the discourse on the praxis of synodality further by addressing the pervasive issue of domestic violence among Filipino women and the challenge it poses to church to become truly synodal by taking more committed measures in order to end the cycle of abuse and violence in many homes. Their study attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct the concept of "home" and "homemaking" from a feminist theological angle, by acknowledging the suffering victim-survivors who are women while recognizing their agency for reclaiming the presence of God within them and creating a sense of home (*tabanan*) which is a space of care and comfort. In the final chapter, Diana Therese Veloso examines the lived experiences and the roles of women in the advancement of peace and social justice in conflict zones in the Philippines as a model of women exercising ecclesial agency in a synodal third space. Examining gender and other intersecting social locating factors using a critical feminist lens, she argues that the inclusion of women's perspectives in promoting justice and peace would contribute to the church's attempts towards realizing the vision of synodality.

Conclusion

Synodality implies a whole new way of being church. It will be interesting to see how women's assertion of being ecclesia as the "synodal third space" relates to synodal process of the church hierarchy at this stage of its implementation. The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops titled, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission," states that "the synodal form of the Church is at the service of its mission, and any change in the life of the Church is intended to make it more capable of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and witnessing to the Gospel of the Lord to the men and women

of our time.”²² Further, Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Secretariat of the Synod, observes that implementation of the synod is a task for which all the baptized share responsibility and that “the entire People of God are the subjects of the synodal journey.”²³

Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) offers this book as our contribution to the synodal process, assuming our responsibility as subjects for the actualization of a synodal way of being church. Our way of exercising subjectivity on this synodal journey impels us to move beyond clear cut notions of theological knowledge-making and rigid boundaries that sets limits to the liberative flow of thought. It is on this canvas that we position the “third space” experiences and explorations of synodality that we, as Christian women, are daring to venture into based on our convictions of what it means to be church.

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²² Mario Cardinal Grech, “Preface,” in *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod 2025–2028*, 3, 4, synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/pathways/250102--ENG-Pathways-for-the-implementation-phase.pdf.

²³ Grech, “Preface,” 3.

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Part 1

Theological Underpinnings of Ecclesia of Women as a Synodal Third Space

1. Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space

Monica J. Melanchthon

I am neither a Catholic by confession, nor am I a systematic theologian, so it is with some reluctance that I share these reflections. My hesitancy also arises from the fact that I was not familiar with the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, and I confess that I was hearing the term “synodality” for the first time when the invitation came. I had to do some quick reading to learn about both the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia* and the topic of “synodality.” I was certainly intrigued. I do not present my reflections as an expert on the subject but rather as someone sharing some initial thoughts so to extend the conversation and to enable further reflection.

“Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space” is a complex theme with so much that can be said about each of the components that comprise this theme—ecclesia, women, synodal/synodality, third space. Each concept requires unpacking for clarity, for there can be multiple definitions or understandings, and I cannot assume that everyone is on the same page with regard to how we understand each of these terms individually or taken together.

Ecclesia, a civic assembly in ancient Greece, is a “called out assembly.” The word is derived from the Greek *ekkaleō* meaning “call out” or “summon,” and hence, a “called assembly.” In biblical usage, it meant the assembly called by God, the church. As a “gathering of those summoned,” it is united by both identity and purpose. The “*Ecclesia of Women in Asia*” is a community, a gathering of women called and sustained by its identity as Catholic and in its participation in the life of the church and society in Asia. In what follows, I attempt to reflect on features which might characterize the “*ecclesia of women as a synodal third space.*” As a biblical reader and reflector, but also as someone committed to context, I seek to reflect on this topic using a scriptural lens to understand the theme, and derive from this select scriptural text insights that would perhaps help us

unpack the theme and ways to implement the vision and mission of this forum.

Synodality and the Synodal Church

“Synodality” was the keyword that was applied by the late Pope Francis for his vision of the church. But what is synodality? Etymologically, it comes from the familiar word “synod” which in Greek is a combination of *syn* [together] and *hodos* [way or journey], often used to describe the process of fraternal collaboration for the future direction of the church. “Synod,” or *σύννοδος* (*synodos*) denotes “journeying/walking together.” Pope Francis reminds us that “the path of synodality is the path which God expects of the church of the third millennium.”¹ There are several features that characterize the understanding of the word “synod” or “synodality.” First, “synodality” speaks of the *involvement and participation of the whole church* in its life and mission.² It is the “specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the people of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.”³ Secondly, a synodal church is *a church which listens*, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing.”⁴ It is about listening to each other and attending to the Holy Spirit that knows no boundaries in order to discern the Spirit’s message to the church. This is essential because “listening reconfigures the whole process of interaction among all ecclesial subjects in a reciprocal and horizontal dynamics founded on the

¹ Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

² International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, no. 6, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

³ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 6.

⁴ Liliane Mugombozi, “Synod of Bishops 2021–2023: Called to Make a Contribution,” *Focolare Movement*, focolare.org/en/synod-of-bishops-2021-2023-called-to-make-a-contribution/.

ecclesiology of the People of God.”⁵ Thirdly, following and listening to the Holy Spirit requires that *we listen to everyone who belongs to the one people of God, including those who live on the borders and edges of the community*. These are, according to Pope Francis, “the poor, the beggars, young drug addicts, all those people that society discards, part of the Synod too . . . Synodality is an expression of the Church’s nature, her form, style and mission.”⁶ It is “realizing that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone,” irrespective of who they are, “to help us walk forward together on our journey as the People of God.”⁷

The call for synodality in the life of the church is an encouragement to foster a new pattern of relationships within the church, so that the church becomes an effective witness to the Gospel in the world. The synodal movement is one that would engage with the life experiences of *all* the faithful, evoking and nurturing greater levels of participation and inclusivity, and gaining from the insights and talents of all, through a more egalitarian system of communication. Thus, synodality involves a reorientation of church life and leadership requiring a different emphasis in how the church faces the task of communicating faith and promoting spiritual learning.

Behind such a process of synodality is the conviction that ordinary people are not simply passive recipients of divine truths and biblical reflections handed down by superiors, the clergy, and so called “experts” and “scholars.” It is the conviction that ordinary people, too, have been given the grace and equipped with the capacity and capability to understand, discern, critically reflect, and articulate what God requires of them, based on life experiences and through their responses to God in faith.

⁵ Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist Press, 2022), cover description.

⁶ Mugombozi, “Synod of Bishops 2021–2023.”

⁷ “What’s Unique About the Synod on Synodality?” *The Jesuits Communications Office*, September 28, 2023, jesuits.global/2023/09/28/what-s-unique-about-the-synod-on-synodality/.

The process of being a synodal church requires more than merely adding a degree of consultation; it is a call to us, ordinary folks and believers, who tend to leave much to the authorities and the powers that be, to be much more actively involved in church life and leadership than is the current norm. This is not easy given the many walls that the ‘superiors’ and so-called experts, have erected to shield the church from change, even the transformational kind—all in the name of safeguarding tradition, but more so to maintain power and control. While synodality appears to be a new way of “being the Church,” in reality, as John Sullivan reminds us, it reflects the practices of the early church. He writes, “In the early years of the church, and at various other times, social networks of Christians preserved and handed on the life of faith without the benefit of formal educational institutions or strong ecclesial structures.”⁸ Synodality therefore exhorts the church to become a far more “participative and co-responsible community,” a community characterized by reciprocal listening, exchange, communication, collaboration, and cooperation, to give and to receive, steeped in respect, charity, humility, and poverty for this is the synodal spirit.⁹ In a synodal church, “decision-making is decentralized, the voice of all is listened to, and a process of discernment rather than a simple ‘command and obey’ model is used to formulate and then confirm by reception the authenticity of Church teaching.”¹⁰

Such an emphasis then requires that all baptized people are heard, listened to, and respected for their faith. Unfortunately, clericalism and misogyny, among other socially driven hierarchies and discriminatory systems such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, and even language, have been and continue to remain the biggest impediments to our being a synodal church. As a movement of women, we are cognizant of the ways in which women have been sidelined and marginalized and denied fuller participation in the life of the church. It is encouraging that Pope Francis

⁸ John William Sullivan, “Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality,” *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 592, doi.org/10.3390/rel14050592.

⁹ Luciani, *Synodality*, 28.

¹⁰ Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis* (Messenger Publications, 2018), 93.

particularly highlights the need to listen to women, noting that the bishops and cardinals likely learned their faith from their own mothers. He states that “it is women who know how to wait, who know how to discover the resources of the church, of the faithful people, who take risk beyond the limit, perhaps with fear but courageous.”¹¹

Ecclesia of Women in the Third Space

The *Ecclesia of Women* understands itself as “an assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs.”¹² It also sees itself as being within a “synodal *third space*” by virtue of their marginal status as women, desiring to redefine synodality from the perspective of their marginalized and excluded experience. The “third space” has been posited as a setting for informal public life, offering connection, community, and sociability.¹³ But in postcolonial discourse, the third space is the “*in-between* space” where some individuals and communities of individuals have fallen—fallen into the cracks of mainstream or officially recognized spaces. These “in-between spaces” are characterized as spaces of creativity and imagination, for it is where difference and cultures overlap and interact and where people can develop their sense of self and identity in conversation with others. These spaces are sites for collaboration and contestation, and they contribute to our understandings and definitions of society. The “in-between space” is, therefore a “hybrid” site that witnesses the production—rather than just the reflection of cultural meaning, community interest, cultural values, and the negotiation of nationhood.¹⁴ Hence, being in the third space can be advantageous in

¹¹ “Pope: I Like to Think of the Church as God’s Faithful People,” *Vatican News*, October 25, 2023, vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-i-like-to-think-of-the-church-as-god-s-faithful-people.html.

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Toward a Feminist Biblical Spirituality: The *Ekklesia* of Women,” in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. (Crossroads Publishing Company, 2000), 343–351.

¹³ Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the “Great Good Places” at the Heart of Our Communities* (Marlowe, 2002).

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 2.

that it is a space of reflection and imagination, a place where difference is performed without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. It provides for a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that “initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”¹⁵ This is very similar to how Indian Catholic theologian Felix Wilfred also defines “margins.”¹⁶ There are many positives to being in the “margins,” according to Wilfred, for margins are the spaces and sites of God’s visitation; places where the misfits of society roam, where self and identity are affirmed and where difference is supported. Margins are also spaces of theological creativity, imagination, innovation, and where one’s theological horizons are widened.¹⁷ We are, as a community of women, therefore in a space that is bursting with opportunities, for despite our marginality, God is amidst us, stirring us into new ways of being and relating to the world. But it is possible that those ways of the world, the hierarchies in society, and the many factors that contribute to discrimination could also seep into our midst and impact us, our relationships, and ways of functioning.

The conditions in which women find themselves in both the society and the church are not without controversy. While our status has improved over the years, there are still many challenges. Women’s economic and social opportunities have increased, but we still face discrimination and violence. Many women must constantly contend with patriarchal values and harmful gender norms that prioritize men and boys over them. Dominant religions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Confucianism alongside Christianity, have played a huge role in conceiving women’s roles in society. Societies in Asia are largely configured on hierarchical relationships, discriminatory structures, and systems such as caste which emphasize family virtues and filial piety. Women’s roles are largely confined

¹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

¹⁶ Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (ISPCK, 2008), xii–xx.

¹⁷ Wilfred, *Margins*, xii–xx.

to the household, serving as wives to husbands and mothers to children.¹⁸ The increased and growing incidence of brazen violence against women in both the domestic and public sphere requires the continued effort on the part of the state, the women's movements, and the church. There is much that can be said in this regard and the effort to improve the lives of women.

As the EWA makes clear, in the church,

Women are clamoring for a listening, dialogical, and service-oriented Church that is a non-hierarchical communion of a "discipleship of equals," marked by mutuality, relationality, and inclusivity. There is need for reimagining *Ecclesia* as a "third space" wherein liminal and marginal voices can be heard. Leadership in the Church needs to be redefined in ways that are empowering to all the marginalized sections. Small communities and liminal spaces emerging from local contexts from below demand recognition and mainstreaming. A feminist/womanist transformation of the Church can lead to a more discerning and imaginative way of being Church, that is more vibrant, authentic, just, and totally at the service of the Reign of God.¹⁹

What, Then, is Required of Us?

What might feminist/womanist and Asian women's imagination and reflection offer towards the transformation of the church? What do we as the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia* need to do to find a "more discerning and imaginative way of being church, that is more vibrant, authentic, just, and totally at the service of the Reign of God"?²⁰ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

¹⁸ Sidney B. Westley, "The Changing Status of Women in Asian Societies," in *The Future of Population in Asia* (East-West Center, 2002), eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/fileadmin/stored/misc/FuturePop05Women.pdf.

¹⁹ "EWA XI Call for Papers: Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space," *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/.

²⁰ "EWA XI Call for Papers."

Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space

If Catholicism is to contribute to the fashioning of a radical democratic catholic-global ethos, then our struggles for the feminist catholicity of the church must remain conscious of their global location and develop spiritual practices and forms of ministry and community that can contribute to justice and well-being for all. We must insist on our intellectual and spiritual freedom to articulate ekklesial, i.e., radical democratic paradigms of how to live in diversity, tolerance, and respect for those who are not like us.²¹

Theologically speaking, feminist and womanist voices the world over have challenged and continue to challenge the notion of canon, orthodoxy, tradition, and universality. Even a cursory survey of feminist/womanist theologies will show that they have questioned classical and traditional understandings of most theological concepts, namely God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, human anthropology, and ecclesiology. These innovative, alternative, and creative configurations and articulations of Christian theology have emerged from contexts of pain and exclusion, by speakers—individuals and communities—who themselves suffer. They speak in their own voices in a context of listening that encourages the telling of truths hitherto suppressed and silenced—voices of women, the earth, those that are disabled, of varied genders and sexual orientation, the traumatized and the colonized, to name a few. Such telling and re-telling, the resulting analyses of power and oppression, and styles of leadership have contributed to the development of subversive discourses. Such discourses come to the fore every time a community, forged by suffering and in solidarity, emerges. Such publics arise as communities that are seeking a shift in power, inspired and driven by democratic ideals of free speech, equality, fairness, justice, and respect for human dignity. Revolutionary and popular movements, education, and ideals of modern

²¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “We are Church—A Kingdom of Priests,” *Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW) Second International Conference: “Breaking Silence, Breaking Bread: Christ Calls Women to Lead,”* July 22, 2025, womensordinationcampaign.org/ottawa-2005/2014/2/2/elizabeth-schussler-fiorenza-we-are-a-church-a-kingdom-of-priests.

liberalism have provided means for marginalized groups, including women, to make their voices heard. And they are challenging and forcing the church to take note of its hierarchical structures, theological positions, outdated platitudes and dogmatisms.

If we are to maintain social fabrics and communities of radical discipleship, which help foster justice and the flourishing of life, then we must learn to address not only the many social, political, and economic issues that plague our world but also our theologies and the lacks within them brought to the fore with changes in contexts, and emergence of new movements through the process of synodality. We need to negotiate relationships, across differences and diversity in race, geographical locations, and confessional ideologies in order to work together for the welfare of humankind and the earth.

We need alternative ways to understand power and values that enhance life, community, healing, and justice, that unleash the life-giving energy necessary for transformation and the creation of just and sustainable life in human communities and on the earth. In analyzing power, we often focus on domination and subordination, on oppression and victimization, on power and powerlessness. These analyses are extremely helpful for revealing the exploitation, alienation, and violence of fixed hierarchies. But they do not take us beyond the need for reversals of power, conflicts of power, balance of power, or the condemnation and avoidance of hierarchical power typical of polemics. To shift the conversation to life giving and transforming power, values, and community involvement, I want to direct our attention to sources of renewed personal agency for change and transformation. Perhaps this will enable us to find concrete strategies which we, as individuals and communities of women, can employ in the work of transforming life and the creation of a synodal church.

In what follows, I will consider two texts and derive from them some insight that might inform us of what is required from us, as women, to engender synodality.

Jeremiah 31:15–22

The book of Jeremiah narrates horrifying accounts of death and destruction in the form of siege, military occupation, and forced relocation—very much like the news we wake up to every morning. His testimony to the crisis that was gripping Israel during his time, resulting in the loss of meaning and civility, as well as the collapse of social systems and venerable institutions, sound remarkably familiar to us today. We live in a time of cities and countries in crisis, increasing national debt that threatens future generations, preemptive military doctrines that destabilize large regions and erode international morale and morality, new technologies—all leading to alienation and dehumanization, consumerist values, immigration legislation rooted in xenophobia and garbed in evangelical piety, forced deportations, rapid depletion of natural and cultural resources, ubiquitous violence, torture and systematic killing of civilians, human trafficking and exploitation of children and women, nuclear, biological and chemical terrorism. Religion/faith is also harnessed for the purposes of creating dissent, suspicion, distorted definitions of nationhood, and separation between communities, races, and cultures. These times have also seen unprecedented protests against governments and structures of power, by massive crowds as never seen before, offering hope for change and transformation. These protests for me are uprisings symbolizing divine presence and accompaniment and the Divine speaking through these movements of dissent.

Jeremiah offers words of both hope and chaos. The book displays raw emotion and gives “speech to the disaster” being experienced by Israel, especially between 587–582 BCE. Chaos and

wreckage not only causes physical and emotional havoc, but it also evokes probing questions about meaning: the meaning of atrocity; the meaning of moral chaos; the meaning of divine silence. The prophetic corpus, like many contemporary expressions of art that are informed by

war atrocities, are penetrating responses to multifaceted configurations of evil, hegemony, and cosmic inertia.²²

The book of Jeremiah provides “a complex theological response, a judgment-salvation schema with multiple voices and counter voices and therefore offers a thick ‘meaning making map’ for those in the midst of suffering.”²³ In one of the most poignant passages of Scripture, the prophet Jeremiah uses Rachel as a personification of the city of Jerusalem and describes her inconsolable grief because her children have been slain or carried into exile. We first meet Rachel, the woman shepherd in Genesis 29. Her life, entwined with that of Jacob and Laban, requires her to wait seven years to marry Jacob and another seven before she becomes a mother. She begs God to give her children (Genesis 30:1), but it is also motherhood that robs her of life (Genesis 35:16–20). Rachel is remembered by her children, grandchildren, and their descendants.

In the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and when many were taken into exile, Jeremiah recalls her name. Jeremiah, a Benjaminite from the village of Anathoth, was a descendant of Rachel. The people are suffering, and the land is in pain; they lament and pray to God. Rachel, the personification of all Israel’s mothers, weeps over the graves of her children.²⁴ Jeremiah memorializes her as a mother who weeps and pleads for her children.

Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
Lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children.
She refuses to be comforted for her children,

²² Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Abingdon Press, 2010), 11.

²³ Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 133ff; see also chapters 4–5.

²⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Smyth and Helwys Books, 2002), 434.

Because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)²⁵

She weeps and refuses to be comforted. Her refusal to be consoled grips our attention. She faces the loss of her children with weeping and loud lamentation, and her crying is bitter. She rejects the comfort extended to her, because she refuses to be reconciled to the injustice and violence of her world. Crying and showing emotion, especially sadness, is understood to be a sign of weakness. Crying is emotional release, but it is also a process of navigation through the complexities of a person's internal world. Despite the resistance to crying, tears can be a positive signal because tears are an indicator not only of emotional vulnerability, but also of strength and courage to face and process difficult experiences. Instead of seeing tears as a weakness, it is important to perceive them as an indication of courage and willingness to address emotional and other wounds. Crying, bitter weeping, is not always a sign of weakness but of resistance which makes way for the new, for transformation and change. Crying indicates significant progress is being made in the process of self-exploration and self-acceptance.

Rachel laments before God, her cry a prayer of lament, and God hears her cry and responds to it with a startling promise. There is hope; your children shall come back to their own country, justice and peace will reign on earth.

Thus says the Lord:
Keep your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,
says the Lord:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
there is hope for your future,
says the Lord:

²⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, the passages from Jeremiah in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version—Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

your children shall come back to their own country. (Jeremiah 31:16–17)

One can discern other voices in the text, and they all address the intense suffering brought on by the destruction and the exile. Rachel's voice—grief stricken, weeping, and powerless—is accompanied by the obedient, disobedient, and repentant voice of Ephraim, the child who is significantly aware that the suffering and exile is justified and deserved penalty.

Indeed, I heard Ephraim pleading:
“You disciplined me, and I took the discipline;
I was like an untrained calf.
Bring me back; let me come back,
for you are the LORD my God.
For after I had turned away, I repented,
and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh;
I was ashamed, and I was dismayed
because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” (Jeremiah 31:18–19)

Women scholars have called attention to the character of God, imaged here as parent. They suggest that the metaphor of parenthood involves God showing “motherly compassion” for the child.

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child in whom I delight?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore, I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:20)

One might ask what is it that necessarily makes God a maternal figure in this text? Surely, a male parent is also capable of showing compassion. Feminist interpretations tend to focus on phrases like “I am deeply

moved,²⁶ translated alternately as, “my heart yearns for him,”²⁷ or as “my heart has a desire,”²⁸ or “my heart longs for him,”²⁹ which some scholars connect to a “stirring or tumult within” similar to the love a mother has for a child. Rachel’s tears and lament and Ephraim’s plea stir/move the inner parts (the womb)³⁰ of the Divine which trembles (yearns/longs/moves) for the child Ephraim and result in the third voice, the voice of Mother God who declares compassion and salvation for Israel.

Set up road markers for yourself;
make yourself signposts;
consider well the highway,
the road by which you went.
Return, O virgin Israel,
return to these your cities.
How long will you waver,
O faithless daughter?
For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth:
a woman encompasses a man. (Jeremiah 31:21–22)

These verses display some of what Renita Weems calls “the messiness of intimacy,” indeed covenant intimacy with God.³¹ God remains powerful,

²⁶ New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized; New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Catholic Edition; New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

²⁷ New International Version; New International Version—UK; New King James Version; Orthodox Jewish Bible; Revised Standard Version; World English Bible; Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

²⁸ New Life Version.

²⁹ New Living Translation; The Voice.

³⁰ See the *Wycliff Bible*: “For Ephraim *is* a dear son to me, *he is* a delightful child; for though I spoke against him, still I remembered him; and so, my bowels, *or my innards*, be concerned for him, I doing mercy shall have mercy on him, saith the Lord”; or *Young’s Literal Translation*, “A precious son is Ephraim to me? A child of delights? For since my speaking against him, I do thoroughly remember him still, therefore have my bowels been moved for him, I do greatly love him, An affirmation of Jehovah.”

³¹ Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Fortress Press, 1995), 82–83.

God punishes, but God is also compassionate and uniquely devoted to Israel.³² The children of Israel will return, and God assures that this will be the case.

Parallels between Rachel and Yahweh occur in each of its three sections. . . . Yet there is a difference. The human mother refuses consolation; the divine mother changes grief into consolation. As a result, the poem has moved from the desolate lamentation of Rachel to the redemptive compassion of God.³³

The pain, the grief and the suffering of the people are surrounded by womanly, mothering ways/maternal thinking, which are first initiated by Rachel. The Lord offers a word of hope:

For I, YHWH, promise to bring about something new on the earth,
something as unique as a woman protecting a man! (Jeremiah 31:22)³⁴

This line has created some confusion as is evident from the varied ways in which it has been translated.³⁵ It has puzzled commentators who either neglect it on the grounds that its meaning is uncertain, unsure, and incomprehensible,³⁶ or see it as “a simple role reversal of power in which a

³² Weems, *Battered Love*, 82–83.

³³ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press, 1978), 45.

³⁴ New English Translation.

³⁵ “For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encompasses a man,” (NRSV); “For the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall court a man,” (JPS); “For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth: a woman protects a man,” (RSV).

³⁶ Says Robert P. Carroll: “The wiser course for the exegete is to admit ignorance and acknowledge that ancient texts occasionally do baffle the modern hermeneut. 31:22b is one such baffling text. . . . In the final analysis I must admit that I do not know what v. 22b means. *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Westminster, 1986), 604–605. Cf. also Kathleen O’Connor: “Its meaning for the poem is not clear . . . [it] refers to future sexual relationships in which women will be active agents in the procreation of a restored people. Perhaps . . . women will be capable of protecting warriors . . . it anticipates role reversals of a different sort.” Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (SPCK/Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 176.

woman takes on the power of a man.”³⁷ Is that what the verse is saying? The vocabulary is strong. Women scholars suggest that the verse is saying that the ways of power and strength, of exclusivity and manipulation, normally associated with the male, have all failed. Instead, Rachel’s faithfulness and patient waiting have become a model for all.

A seminal contribution to the meaning of this verse has been offered by Phyllis Trible. She finds clues to the meaning of this line in Genesis 1:27 in which *zā·kār* (the male) and *n^eqēbâ* (the female) are created in the divine image, both of which are all encompassing terms referring to the entire species of male and female.³⁸ Jeremiah uses *b^tûlâ*, a virgin or young woman, in verse 21, who is instructed homeward, but in verse 22 he uses *n^eqēbâ* derived from the verb meaning “pierce, bore, or penetrate,” therefore an experienced woman. It is the *n^eqēbâ* that surrounds not the *zā·kār*³⁹ or the male of Genesis 1:27 but the *gā·ber*, the young and strong man, the virile, and powerful man, with strong military connotations.⁴⁰ There are two contrary images of a woman here⁴¹—the *b^tûlâ*—the young, innocent, vulnerable and inexperienced daughter and the experienced, *n^eqēbâ*, and it is the latter who will encompass or surround the strong, powerful, warrior man.

As an inclusive and concluding referent, the *n^eqēbâ* encompasses poetically all the specific female images of the poem. . . . Accordingly,

³⁷ Cf. William L. Holladay, “Jeremiah and Women’s Liberation,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1972): 213–233.

³⁸ Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 48.

³⁹ Understood as “male offspring.”

⁴⁰ The term *gā·ber* is derived from *gabar*, a verb meaning “to prevail, to have strength, to be great.” It is a verb often used with a man/male as subject, that distinguishes him from women, children, and non-combatants, whom he is to defend. The term is used primarily in poetic texts. See Francis Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson Academic, 1994).

⁴¹ Cf. J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Eerdmans, 1980), 576. Based on Jeremiah 30:5–7, Thompson makes a distinction between daughter Zion and warriors who become women, effeminate: “Israel is then both feminine and effeminate.”

female surrounding man is Rachel, the mother embracing her sons with tears and with speech.⁴²

The central paradigm of hope and future transformation in this text is the woman/mother.⁴³ The female imagery surrounds Ephraim; the female surrounds the warrior; the words of a mother embrace her son.⁴⁴ It is a text which maintains that “the surprising new role of women symbolizes a changed order of relationships in a reconstituted and joyous society.”⁴⁵ The line therefore goes beyond a simple role reversal and offers a vision, a hope in the transformation and defeat of traditional values of control, power, and conquest that deny life, even extinguish it. Is the prophet saying that the ways of men have failed? Their ways have only brought death, suffering, and tears. Is the prophet therefore suggesting that women should now lead? He seems to be affirming that women’s ways, strategies, and approaches will now surround the man—to bring hope, calm, reconciliation, and transformed living conditions. This word of hope is offered amid conflict, despair, and utter hopelessness.⁴⁶

Women Talking

Reflection on “synodality” as journeying together, listening, and dialogue reminded me of the 2022 movie *Women Talking* that has left a lasting impression on me. Directed by Sarah Polley, the movie is an adaptation of the 2018 book of the same title written by Miriam Toews, a Canadian novelist, which is “an imagined response to real events.”⁴⁷ The events that

⁴² Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 48–49.

⁴³ Rita Nakashima Brock, “A New Thing in the Land: The Female Surrounds the Warrior,” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Scholars Press, 1997), 157.

⁴⁴ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 45.

⁴⁵ O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” 176.

⁴⁶ See also Monica J. Melanchthon, “Mothering Ways and Reconciliation,” *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, ed. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jørgensen (Regnum, 2013), 146–159.

⁴⁷ Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Faber, 2018).

spurred Toews's imagination took place from 2005 to 2009 at a Mennonite colony in Manitoba, Bolivia, where women and girls, ranging from age 5 to 65, would wake up having no idea what happened, but seeing blood on their sheets and legs, or their underwear missing. These drugged sexual assaults/attacks were apparently attributed (by men of course) to ghosts, demons, Satan, or hysteria ("wild female imagination"),⁴⁸ while others accused them of sin, and of covering up adultery, that left many of these women and girls terrorized, pregnant, or dead. When one of the perpetrators is caught, the women find out that eight men—their very own husbands, brothers, relatives, and neighbors—have been sneaking into the bedrooms of women and girls at night, equipped with livestock tranquilizer, and raping their unconscious victims. On average, the attacks took place every three or four days.⁴⁹ The colony's elders admitted the problem and tried to shield the accused but had to involve the secular authorities to protect the accused. The question then is how the women should respond. In the real and actual incident, there was a sensational trial, in which the victims showed up to testify. The eight men were sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for the rape and sexual assault of one hundred and fifty women and girls,⁵⁰ one as young as three years old.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Toews, "A Note on the Novel," in *Women Talking* (Faber, 2022).

⁴⁹ Toews, *Women Talking*, 15.

⁵⁰ The figures vary. In an interview by *The Guardian*, Toews claims that it was more than 130 women. A Mennonite who grew up in a similar colony in Ukraine, Toews expresses an affinity with the women in Bolivia and says she could have been one of them. See Katrina Onstad, "Interview: Miriam Toews: I Needed to Write About These Women. I Could Have Been One of Them," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2018, theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/18/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-mennonite; "At least 300 female members of the colony had been attacked, from toddlers to grandmothers," writes Parul Seghal, "In 'Women Talking,' Miriam Toews Ponders Punishment and Justice After Horrifying Crimes," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2019, nytimes.com/2019/04/02/books/review-women-talking-miriam-toews.html.

⁵¹ Linda Pressly, "The Rapes Haunting a Community That Shuns the 21st Century," *BBC News*, May 16, 2019, bbc.com/news/stories-48265703; Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia," *Vice*, December 22, 2013, vice.com/en/article/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/.

The novel and the movie are set in the aftermath of these crimes. The men leave the commune to secure the release of the accused men. The bishop of the colony wants the men to be able to come home and the women to forgive them so that all victims and perpetrators can have a place in heaven. Anyone who does not comply with this is threatened with expulsion from the farm to a life outside for which they have not been equipped, having lived all their lives on the farm. Toews begins the novel by declaring that, the novel is “both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events and an act of female imagination.”⁵² The group of women, eight in total, belong to three generations. They are of varied marital status and mostly victims, representing two families, namely the Loewens and the Friesens. In the group are Greta Loewen and Agata Friesen, the oldest women of each family. Their daughters, Mariche and Mejal Loewen and Ona and Salome Friesen, and granddaughters Autje Loewen and Neitje Friesen complete the group. Ona Friesen is pregnant with her rapist’s child, and teenager Neitje Friesen’s mother had committed suicide. Another woman who was present had been raped several times but denied treatment for a sexually transmitted disease by the bishop, because doctors would talk, and the case would be known. Left with “a brief window in which to *imagine* their future,”⁵³ they meet in a hayloft, a makeshift court of sorts, to hash out a course of action. They appoint August, the one male in the group and the only literate individual in the gathering to write the minutes.⁵⁴

Before they begin their conversation, the women wash each other’s feet, as a “symbolic act representing . . . service to each other,” and in memory

⁵² Toews, “A Note on the Novel.”

⁵³ Mark Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review—A Stellar Ensemble Energises Sarah Polley’s Timeless Parable,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2023, [theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/12/women-talking-review-sarah-polley-timeless-parable-sexual-abuse-mennonites-rooney-mara-claire-foy-jessie-buckley-frances-mcdormand](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/12/women-talking-review-sarah-polley-timeless-parable-sexual-abuse-mennonites-rooney-mara-claire-foy-jessie-buckley-frances-mcdormand).

⁵⁴ In the book, the story is narrated by August Epp, the “minute taker,” “since the women were illiterate and unable to do it themselves.” See Toews, *Women Talking*, 1. A good part of the novel is August’s transcription of the conversation/debate interspersed with occasional observations and background information by August.

of “Jesus’ washing of the feet” of his disciples, while saying “*God bless you to each other.*”⁵⁵ The debate which follows arouses danger, doubt, fear, tears, and deep pain as they recall their own experiences as well as giggles and laughter, providing comic relief. Their conversation is interspersed with singing. The women seek to be democratic and have already voted on a referendum offering three choices: 1) Do nothing—forgive, forget, and hope for the best; 2) Stay and fight; or 3) Leave.⁵⁶ Through the course of the conversation, which is also a debate, “carried out in Low German, the only language they know,”⁵⁷ the women “unpick the ethical conundrums attached to their three possible courses of action.”⁵⁸ They had only two days to organize and decide between the options.⁵⁹ At one point in the film *Autje*, Mariche’s teenage daughter, addresses herself to Ona’s unborn child and says, “We had 24 hours to imagine what kind of world you would be born into.”

The “Do Nothing,” option was not popular. Some women tended to lean towards it, and “to leave things in the hands of the Lord.”⁶⁰ The option to vote for it “would at least be empowering.”⁶¹ But doing nothing would be sinful, because it would denigrate “the central tenet of the Mennonite faith, which is pacifism, because by staying we would knowingly be placing ourselves in a direct collision course with violence, perpetrated by us or against us. . . . By staying we would be inviting harm, we would be in state of war, be bad Mennonites.”⁶² The debate was not

⁵⁵ Toews, *Women Talking*, 19–20.

⁵⁶ Because the women were illiterate, they had to draw images to help them distinguish between these options. Option 1 was depicted as an empty horizon, Option 2 was a drawing of two members of the commune engaged in a duel with knives, and Option 3 was depicted as the rear end of a horse. Toews, *Women Talking*, 6. See also, “*Women Talking*,” *The Famous Feminist*, fmus.org/women-talking for the images used.

⁵⁷ Toews, *Women Talking*, 8.

⁵⁸ Anthony Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews—Review,” *The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/10/women-talking-miriam-toews-review.

⁵⁹ Toews, *Women Talking*, 5.

⁶⁰ Toews, *Women Talking*, 7.

⁶¹ Toews, *Women Talking*, 7.

⁶² Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews.”

free of minor conflict between the two families. “Should they stay within the community that has raped and abused them, or leave, thereby casting themselves out of the Garden of Eden, estranged from the God in whom they still place their faith?”⁶³ But in order to stay, they had to forgive the men. What does forgiveness mean in this instance? “Is forgiveness that is coerced true forgiveness?”⁶⁴ asks Ona Freisen. “Perhaps forgiveness can, in some instances, be confused with permission.”⁶⁵ Doesn’t God alone have the prerogative to forgive?

Time was short, and the urgency to decide was palpable! They settle in to debate the remaining two options, arguing the relative merits of exit and voice.⁶⁶ Salome expresses anger, that she would rather stand her “ground and shoot each man in the heart.” She vows to “burn forever in hell” before she would “allow another man to satisfy his violent urges with the body of my four-year-old child.” Mejal, who has panic attacks, says rather disturbingly that “they made us disbelieve ourselves.” A huge silence follows, screaming to be filled by voices sarcastically described in the novel as “only women talking.”

These women with minimal education were illiterate, but their wisdom, attained through farm and household labor, child-rearing, understanding of the Bible, faith, prayer and intuition, is vast. It is “sufficient to spur the emergence of a powerful and sophisticated collective political consciousness and debate.”⁶⁷ They debate over awkward but basic questions such as whether mothers will need to abandon sons if the women decide to leave the men. “Who will take care of our brothers? Who will do the milking and make men their supper?”—revealing the conundrum, they faced as mothers and wives. They realize

⁶³ Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review.”

⁶⁴ Toews, *Women Talking*, 26.

⁶⁵ Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review.”

⁶⁶ A.O. Scott, “‘*Women Talking*’ Review: The Power of Speech,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/12/22/movies/women-talking-review.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/movies/women-talking-review.html).

⁶⁷ Scott, “‘*Women Talking*’ Review.”

that they were treated no better than animals and wondered if women were animals; at least animals fight back and run away!⁶⁸

The questions they raise in the course of the conversation are revealing. “Is it okay to harbor a little bit of hate,” asks Mejal. “A very small amount is a necessary ingredient to life . . . to survival,” says Salome.⁶⁹ Is it blasphemy to question and reproach God? What does God really want of women? Who are we after we have liberated ourselves?⁷⁰ There is much “moral and theological to-ing and fro-ing, as they spar over how best to remain faithful to a system that has been used to betray them so brutally. The improbable, almost magical result creates something redemptive from a subject that seems anything but.”⁷¹ How they arrive at a clear understanding of their oppression and potential liberation, physically and theologically, is the film’s subject, a source of suspense, emotion and inspiration.

While the book specifies the location to be Molotschna, the film chooses to be vague by not specifying the location. That vagueness as one reviewer writes, “reflects the universality of the story’s themes.” What is also perhaps significant are the three options placed before the women—do nothing, stay and fight, or leave—are options that many women confront at some time in their lives, be it family, marriage, church or workspace. It is reminiscent also of the choice women within the church faced in the early years of feminist consciousness and perhaps in some ways, choices that women wrestle with all the time as they negotiate life, identity, and their humanity.

Through the vibrant and engaging conversation and the theological and political progression, these women embody what Pope Francis alluded to in his opening speech to the Synod, on October 4, 2023, namely, that we must become a church of encounter, of listening and dialogue, “a

⁶⁸ Toews, *Women Talking*, 24.

⁶⁹ Toews, *Women Talking*, 27.

⁷⁰ Toews, *Women Talking*, 28.

⁷¹ Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews.”

church that makes itself a conversation,” a spirit filled synodal community.⁷² The film and the book are mostly about voice—a weaving of voices sometimes in harmony, other times in dissonance, passionate and principled, at times certain and confident, other times searching and vulnerable, caring and angry—in fact raging—sympathetic, and at times mischievous and humorous.

Ecclesia of Women in a Synodal Third Space—A Community Forged in Pain

What might we take away from these two narratives or rather what insights do the texts that we have looked at, albeit briefly, offer us to get us started on making this vision of synodality a reality? First, a pointer to who we are.

The women who gathered in the hayloft were women in pain, and it was their shared pain that created solidarity and the awareness that there were varied ways of responding to the pain. Rachel spearheads the formation of a community forged in pain through her tears and lament and she refuses to be comforted. Her pain and grief and the ensuing resistance to being comforted serve as a catalyst for others to embrace a similar posture. We need to acknowledge that we are a community that has been formed out of pain and some disillusionment with the way things are within the faith community we belong to and in our societies. This pain arises from being excluded, from not being listened to, from being violated, and from recognizing that we are not alone in our pain.

Pain, according to Italian philosopher Antonio Negri, “is a key that opens the door to the community.”⁷³ Fear creates a hierarchy between the one who fears and the one who causes the fear, since it arises out of an authoritarian and dictatorial foundation. Pain on the other hand enables camaraderie and community and provides the democratic foundation of

⁷² Francis, “Homily at St. Peter’s Square,” October 4, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html).

⁷³ Michael Hardt, “Foreword—Creation beyond Measure,” in Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, with a foreword by Michael Hardt and commentary by Roland Boer, trans. Matteo Mandarinini (Duke University Press, 2009), xiv.

political society. Collective subjects/communities are formed by shared pain, those that struggle against the diminishing and expropriation of life by power. The power established in pain, is the power of non-being, it is the power of community—an ambiguous essence within an indefinitely creative process. When power includes pain, it leads to the formation of community and the bringing together of life, death, of power and action, giving rise to immense possibilities.⁷⁴

It is our experiences of church, our shared pain, and our identity as women of faith that have brought us together, and enables us to recognize that we occupy the “third space,” a space that is marginal and yet vibrant and alive with shared purpose, creativity, and imagination. We are united in purpose, with power established in this pain and disappointment, the power of being non-beings or diminished beings. We lament our experiences within the church and share our disappointments so as to encourage and empower one another to resist, to rebel, and to imagine a movement that equips us to imagine and strive for a church that is inclusive and allows for a discipleship of equals.

What Might We Do to Move Forward, to Be a Synodal Community?

Mourn

Mourning is the act of feeling and expressing deep sorrow. We mourn and grieve over the treatment of women, over the hierarchical structures of power in church and society that deny women their personhood, humanity, and dignity. Judith Butler reminds us that the universal experience of loss has contributed to the making of a tenuous “we.”⁷⁵ Butler reminds us that we are socially constructed bodies; we depend on each other; and we are at risk of being severed from those attachments. Our shared grief creates community for grief; if it is genuine, cannot be

⁷⁴ Negri, *The Labor of Job*, 90–91.

⁷⁵ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), 20.

outsourced. It can only be shared. Our mourning is filled with the awareness of social wrongs and is the embodiment of genuine solidarity. The community of *Women Talking*, forged in pain, mourned together their shared experience of abuse and vulnerability and the feeling of being ‘let down’ by the leadership, of being treated as animals by the community and perhaps even by the Mennonite faith. Their gathering in grief and Rachel’s weeping and the community that surrounded her might represent in Butler’s words, a form of “egalitarian mourning.” Mourning and grieving together forge deep human bonds. In the bonds of mourning, we share more. Hence, Butler says that egalitarian mourning can expand the very conception of what it means to be human.⁷⁶ It can engender resoluteness and determination to ensure that women will not continue to experience abuse and to work for change and transformation, leading to new life. Our shared pain and love for each other and true mourning have the capacity to produce the conditions for a transformative politics. What do we mourn for? And why?

Lament

The lament is a passionate expression of grief and sorrow, most often in the form of a formal prayer, song (a dirge), poem, or passionate verbal complaint about something mourned or lost. The “unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God,”⁷⁷ is the lament, characteristic of the Hebrew prayer ubiquitous within the Psalter. Billman and Migliore liken Rachel in Jeremiah 31 to the biblical Job, as “a resister, a protester, who refuses the consolation of unorthodox theology and conventional pastoral care.”⁷⁸ They also stress that Rachel’s lament is not for herself. Her prayer will not bring the dead back to life, instead it will assure the continued life of the living. This lamentation is about the affirmation of life.

⁷⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

⁷⁷ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Wipf and Stock, 2006), 6.

⁷⁸ Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 10.

The prayers and laments are uttered for the sake of the living, for the continuance of their life, for the redemption of the community's soul, its humanity as it were, and its ability to regain the power to feel, to weep, to care and to love.⁷⁹

Lament is not just crying aloud. It begins with naming and questioning the pain. The questions 'Why?', 'How?', and 'When?' are foundational to the lament tradition since the suffering, evil, and chaos is incomprehensible. Although we are not given access to the content of Rachel's lament, we imagine that it was daring, powerful, and disturbing, a lament that is also a prophetic cry, for her crying is a resistance to consolation—"She refuses to be comforted for her children . . ." (Jeremiah 31:5)—and hence is an expression of faithfulness, calling God to account, for God, she believes, is the God of life. God seems to be behaving in ways contrary to what she understood God to be. In refusing to accept easy consolation, Rachel does what is right. Her weeping and lamenting and her resistance to consolation is a protest, a questioning, a censoring of God while at the same time a waiting on God. Her resistance to all easy comfort registers a powerful protest to brazen and outrageous suffering and injustice. It is a protest so deep that it must become a prayer, for only God can provide the needed hope that justice will prevail and that the future will be different.⁸⁰

The women in Molotschna are not said to lament. In other words, there are no words addressed directly to God. But the lament is embedded within their tears, voices, their questions, their anger, their hate, and their bodily presence. Herein lies the initial and required power for the forming of a new just order/community.

Rachel's lament paradoxically makes room for the new. It keeps open the possibility of once again praising God, not falsely or mechanically, but from the heart. Only in the longing for continued life, and redemption from the ravages of sickness, war and suffering, can the seeds of renewed hope for the coming reign of God's justice and peace take root. Rachel's

⁷⁹ Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

⁸⁰ Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

lament is not contrary to praise but the precondition of authentic, honest praise.⁸¹

Courageous people do not flinch from bearing or exposing their pain in public. Lamenting in public, and protesting even at the cost of their bodies, exposing their pain in the most visible of forms—whether through the wearing of black or stripping naked, risking shame and censure—their lament forms are radical and confronting! Women mourn for their children, but they also mourn for their people, their countries, their churches, and those involved in the conflict. They are aware that violence is not the path to take; there is no security in it; in fact, there is no security in the blood shed by innocent victims. They are cognizant of the fact that there are other non-violent ways to address violence. What is our lament? How might we employ lament in our work?

Imagine

The only grace we can have is the grace to imagine. Imagination is born out of hope, and hope emerges among the vulnerable and wounded.⁸² Hope is not only about the future, but also, in fact, the fuel that keeps the current struggles going. Hope is not found in triumphal hegemony or the customary military pomp and circumstance—that is, in the garb of winners.⁸³ Hope is born when one is able to resist and relinquish oppressive modes of power and orientation. When one surrenders “one’s old identity and accept one’s marginal status, then despair loses its grip, and hope is born.”⁸⁴

The women arrive at a final decision—Leave! They are nervous, having never ventured out of the commune, ignorant of what they might encounter. But there is no time to dwell on the unknown. They need to prepare for the journey, a journey to freedom, to peace, to find purpose, to life. They need food, money, leaving 10 percent as tithe, a map, a buggy—

⁸¹ Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 17.

⁸² Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Fortress Press, 2002).

⁸³ Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 136–137.

⁸⁴ Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 135–136.

material essentials. But they also imagine a future where they have freedom, freedom and time to learn how to write their names. And they carry with them their memories, their faith, and the knowledge that “consciousness is resistance” and that “faith is action.”⁸⁵

We need to imagine a future before we can work for its realization. Imagination is vital. It demands attention and has the capacity to generate compassion. Imagination can enable us to see beyond ourselves (like Hannah and Mary the mother of Jesus, who put their imagination into song) and toward the entire human species and all that is endangered along with us (such as other marginalized groups and the earth). We can then try to envisage how present conflicts may affect beings not yet even born and consider our responsibility toward the past as well—what many have called our stewardship of resources that are not ours to use up or destroy at will.⁸⁶ What is the content of our imagination?

Practice Mothering Ways

At the center of Toews’s book are also mothers who confess and seek forgiveness from their daughters for not raising them differently, for not encouraging agency and independence and voice, and mothers determined to protect the lives of their children, to raise and socialize their boys with respectful attitudes to girls and women. While the book does not tell us the ways these women may act to bring change, justice and peace, what the prophet Jeremiah is calling for is the employment of maternal thinking which dominates the text—both human and divine—to grieve and to console. It involves adopting a mindset focused on nurturing, protecting the vulnerable, fostering growth, and prioritizing care, responsibility, and connection. These often stem from the practices of mothering but are applicable to broader life, politics, and security, involving attentive love

⁸⁵ Toews, *Women Talking*, 214.

⁸⁶ Sissela Bok, *A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War* (Pantheon Books, 1989), 27–28.

and a focus on vulnerability rather than control.⁸⁷ It's about a deep-seated, active care for what is small, weak, or developing, extending beyond biological motherhood to a philosophy of peace and responsibility.

Most women and mothers sit on the pivot of power and powerlessness, of domination and silence, of hope and despair, and of abuse and empowerment. Women employ a power that is channeled and used for the betterment of those in pain and suffering. It is power that is vested in bodies, in solidarity and community; it is a means to action; it is 'power-with' and is related to knowledge, love, difference and embodiment. Per Denise Ackerman, "Power is the reciprocal energy that engages us with one another and with God in such a way that power becomes synonymous with the vitality of living fully and freely."⁸⁸ It is a power that "surrounds," not overpowers; it is a power that is life giving; it is power tapped from one's grief. And it is a power that is compassionate; it is the power of repentance, of brokenness, and shame; it is the power that is capable of overcoming pain and suffering, of neutralizing death and violence, of transforming defiance and shame through actions that are risky, frightening, and threatening.⁸⁹

Recognize the Power of "Voice"

We use our voices all the time—to communicate our needs and wants. But the idea of "voice" or "having a voice" goes much deeper, because having a voice gives an individual agency and power, and a way to express one's values, beliefs, desires and aspirations both for oneself as well as for society at large. In our discussions within the church and communities with a liberational bent, we have often spoken about "giving voice to the

⁸⁷ Sarah Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Child Nurturance*, vol. 1: *Philosophy, Children, and the Family*, ed. A.C. Cafagna, R.T. Peterson, C.A. Staudenbaur (Springer, 1982), 101–126, doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-3473-6_11.

⁸⁸ Denise Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Eerdmans, 2003), 74.

⁸⁹ Rita Nakashima Brock, "A New Thing in the Land: The Female Surrounds the Warrior," 157.

voiceless,” and in some ways, if you will permit me to say, the phrase has an arrogant tone to it. What do we mean when we say we are about “giving voice to the voiceless”? Who are “the voiceless”? The ones who are usually excluded from public discourse—and who, more broadly, lack political and economic power and visibility are described as “the voiceless.”

The notion of “the voiceless” therefore suggests a fixed and clearly defined group. It also implies that the so-called voiceless do not have a voice, that they are incapable of expressing themselves. Such an understanding safeguards the privileged and the powerful, who present themselves as spokespersons of the voiceless. It also deprives the voiceless of their visibility and agency. The “voice of the voiceless” concept masks the fact that voiceless people do in fact have voices. But the voices of the historically underrepresented, marginalized, discriminated, economically disadvantaged, the disabled and vulnerable seen as the voiceless have actually been rendered speechless, whose voices have been suppressed, silenced, ignored or taken or perhaps even been stolen. Voicelessness in our society is not just of expression, but of reception as well.⁹⁰

Proverbs 31:8–9 encourages us to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.” This idea of speaking for someone else is significant. What does this involve? Giving such communities “a voice” would involve analyzing, recognizing, and challenging the means and methods by which they have been rendered voiceless. In other words, voice must be understood in relation to other forms of exploitation—be it sex, race, caste, ethnicity, ability, and the like. These structural inequalities need to be identified, unmasked, and queried. These voices, often sidelined, need to be listened to, heard, and amplified to feel the weight of their meaning, power, and resonance.

Rachel’s voice and lament is heard, and God responds. In the safe space of the hayloft, the women share their voice, and each hear the other and share their pain through ritual and dialog. But the space also provides for

⁹⁰ Jesse Wilson, “Voices from Solitary: ‘Loneliness Is a Destroyer of Humanity,’” *Solitary Watch*, July 7, 2012, solitarywatch.org/2012/07/07/voices-from-solitary-loneliness-is-a-destroyer-of-humanity/.

expressions of anger, pain, fear, lament, laughter, for questions. In my mind, the speaking and the listening are synodality in action. In the sharing, each woman had to go where the other led them, sometimes hesitantly and other times willingly, informed by their experience, faith, and the desire to forge a new life, free, where they could exercise their freedom and their identity as women created in the image of a mothering God, where they could infuse the world with women's ways of being and thinking and relating.

Conclusion

Synodal engagement is both a process and a result, at the center of which is the creation of dialog, listening in trust and tolerance, justice, and peace. The process and the outcomes are embedded in each other, and the steps taken toward a state of life and transformation must themselves reflect the qualities of relating such as caring, mutual respect and honesty.⁹¹ To be an effective presence and influence in the third space, requires a sensitive and feeling-ful understanding of the suffering women and marginal communities face both within and outside the church. It requires that we use our experience of marginalization and knowledge derived from it and our empathetic understanding in service of our caring for others and ourselves. This is the center piece of womanist/feminist and maternal thinking.

A commitment to life and transformation “requires disputants to be sufficiently capable of experiencing, acknowledging, and articulating feelings that their capacity for transformation . . . is not impaired by emotional rigidity.”⁹²

Women employ their varied experience—of love, of tenderness, and of compassion. The tender love and resistance Jeremiah perceived came to focus in the lovely figure of the earthly mother, Rachel, and the divine

⁹¹ Cynthia E. Cohen, *A Poetics of Reconciliation: The Aesthetic Mediation of Conflict* (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 1997), 25.

⁹² Cohen, *A Poetics of Reconciliation*, 70.

mother, YHWH, whose womb was moved. Miriam Toews's book is an "act of female imagination." The women in her imagination did not want pity or revenge. They only wanted a better world for themselves and a safe future for their children. They decided to leave the community. Their leaving is not a rejection of their faith or belief, but rather a way to re-establish it on a firmer, more coherent moral basis. They imagined "a new colony" of trust and safety, of respect and voice, of justice and fairness, of dignity and relation. The book recalls and rekindles the spirit of protest against all arbitrary and unaccountable authority.

Culturally women have been conditioned to think relationally, to prize caring, and favor egalitarian models geared to sharing. They use experience to guide them into new ways of seeing, of being, of caring, and of envisioning a new world. Their bodies and lives are store-houses of experience, mostly of agony, but out of this pain arises a strong yearning for relationship and community. It is in this yearning lies their power both personal and spiritual. In the consideration of the biblical text and *Women Talking*, and knowledge derived from the functioning of women's groups for peace and reconciliation, mutual caring, respect and relationality, the ability to feel, to mourn, to weep, to lament, and risk oneself, courage, being guided by experience, imagination, hope and a relinquishment of modes of power and orientation that oppress and subjugate, solidarity—these are the ingredients to sustain life as offered by the powerless and the way forward to establish a "new colony" of discipleship, of equality and fairness.

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2. Mary and the Women in the Synodal Model of Church in Acts

Judette Gallares

The Upper Room or the Cenacle, the place of the first assembly of the apostles together with Mary and the women after the Ascension of the Risen Christ, is considered the birthplace of the church. What happened there gives us a glimpse of the Holy Spirit's continuing action and influence in the life of the church from its infancy. It also presents a paradigm of church as the body of Christ giving us a renewed understanding of what it is to be the People of God in today's world, a synodal church.

In this chapter, I would like to explore the meaning of Cenacle as a symbolic place and theological space where the Holy Spirit's creative energy gave birth to Christ's body, the church. What was the assembly like? In what way was Acts 1:14–16 a synodal model of church? What was the role of Mary and the women in the first assembly in Acts, and what can they teach us in reclaiming our place in the synodal church? How can we redefine and live synodality as women theologians?

In exploring the answers to these questions, let us begin by unpacking the rich meanings of the place where it all began, the upper room (*cenaculum* in Latin) in Jerusalem. The term, Cenacle, will be explored as a symbolic place that leads us to a theological space, where we will look more closely into its ecclesiological meaning and the place of synodality in it. It is within this active and receptive faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, that the mystery of the Cenacle comes into being. It is

a mystery that is both an innovation and a foundation, placing the infant Christian community between what has been and what is to come.¹

The Acts of the Apostles is an authoritative document of the early church, describing the life of the early Christian community, which was steadfast in prayer. There are two verses in Acts that are considered as a “summary statement” or “end of Luke’s introduction,” which prepares for further events of this book. These two verses will help us get started: “when they reached the city they went to the upper room where they were staying . . . With one heart, all these joined constantly in prayer, together with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:13–14).

The Cenacle as a Symbolic Place

To enter more deeply into the meaning of a word, it is suggested that we look into the root word. According to Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, a source or root word is charged with meanings, “like a sea shell which all by itself brings back to us . . . the fury of the sea, as well as its mesmerizing murmur or its unceasing wash.”² In situating the meaning of the word “Cenacle,” it is interesting to note that for centuries, the single word has carried a certain symbolic richness in that it has signified a variety of spaces.³ As a root word, it is more than a label for a specific reality. It contains intimations regarding the very core of this word, suggesting its inner dynamism and its inherent distinctiveness. It is therefore essential that we try to bring to the surface all the implications the name Cenacle bears.⁴ The term is used to allude to its deeper symbolic meaning, referring to the first Cenacle as a paradigm for today, crystallized in Mary, the being and attitude of its ecclesial identity.

¹ Ghislaine Cote, *The Cenacle: Its Christological Foundations and Spirituality* (Beauchesne Editeur, 1991), 73.

² Cote, *The Cenacle*, 27–28.

³ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

⁴ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

To appreciate the rich meanings of this root word, let us look at how it is described both in Latin and in Greek. The Latin term, *cenaculum*, is first of all a room for eating, a room for the *cena*—the meal, the dinner. It refers to the gathering place of the disciples at key moments in their history with Jesus.⁵ Interestingly, as a place and a space, it is also understood in several ways: as *anagaion* in Greek, which means a section of a room above; or a type of place which is referred to in Greek as *kataluma* or a meeting place or guest room.⁶ Luke also refers to it as a place where one stops during a voyage, or a place for resting, *diversorium* in Latin, while Mark adds another reference to it as a place of refreshment and repair, a place of recovery, *refectio* in Latin.⁷

Whatever meanings might be attached to this root word—as a dining room, a meeting room, an upper room, a room to rest—the Cenacle assumes the symbolism of a home, a dwelling place. It recalls the first Cenacle and the events which made it a meeting place of God with God’s people.⁸

At the center of this meeting place, is a table, a social furniture, which shows “a special relationship with a table, that piece of furniture used for meeting and that place that is eminently personal, that is both private and open.”⁹ Theologian Ghislaine Cote adds this description about this social furniture which is an important piece of furniture in any dwelling place:¹⁰

A table is, par excellence, a social furniture . . . It is furniture for meeting: a table is made to be surrounded. It is a defined surface, but its borders do not cut off, rather they invite, indeed permanently provide, a recognized place for meeting Therefore “a table” is the furniture of dialogue, where all can express themselves, where purposes, projects, and

⁵ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

⁶ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

⁷ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 32.

⁸ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

⁹ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 33.

¹⁰ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 34.

questions circulate freely, where the outlines of the future begin to emerge.¹¹

Another notable meaning of a dwelling place is its connotation of a place of interiority.¹² It alludes to a feminine symbol, carrying with it a sense of a place of safety, as a mother would hold a child at her breast. As a root word, it can allude to that secret chamber whose passage is a required test in all rituals of initiation, for that chamber symbolizes the place of the death of the old being and the birth of the new person.¹³

The Cenacle as a Theological Space

The word “space” has many meanings depending on what discipline or perspective is being used. It contains existential, symbolic, and metaphorical meanings. Theological reflections about space and place provide a deep challenge and an urgent necessity for theology to become aware not only of its embeddedness in the existential spatiality of life but also in the symbolic and spiritual realms of life. The Cenacle is both a symbolic place and a theological space as it refers to a conceptual or metaphorical space where individuals or groups engage in theological reflection, study, discussion, sharing of faith, exploration of religious beliefs, and critique of structures that diminish human life and dignity. Theological spaces can be both physical and metaphorical, providing a setting for spiritual growth, community building, and the deepening of religious understanding.

The Cenacle as a theological space highlights three things that Scripture has foretold about the Messiah: his passion, his resurrection, and his mission of universal salvation. In the first assembly at the Cenacle, Jesus is recognized as the longed-for Messiah because he realizes all three, with the third sign of his messiahship not realized during his earthly life but is being

¹¹ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 34.

¹² Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves* (José Corti, 1942), 18, referenced in Cote, *The Cenacle*, 38.

¹³ Cote, *The Cenacle*, 38.

realized up to the present by and through the Body of Christ, the church. The realization of this third sign is not something static as it grows, adapts, and transforms its self-understanding of mission through the interaction of the body of Christ with history, culture, events, and the world.

The Catholic Church today, as the body of Christ, is experiencing a breakthrough into a fuller stage of self-understanding and of self-appropriation as the body of Christ, through a process known as “synodality.”¹⁴ This is the context in which I would like to discuss what the Cenacle can contribute to our understanding of synodality as both a symbolic place and a theological space. The broader meaning of synodality contains three key metaphors or elements: journeying, creativity, and responsibility,¹⁵ indicating the path along which the People of God walk together as followers of Jesus, who presents himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).¹⁶ Synodality is not new, however its meaning and understanding must be aligned with the ongoing journey of the people of God. This renewal is always through the influence and action of the Holy Spirit, which God has gifted to the infant church in order to fulfill its universal mission of salvation, which the risen Lord had entrusted to his followers gathered at the Upper Room. According to the International Theological Commission, synodality is “an essential dimension of the Church” in the sense that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the word ‘synod.’”¹⁷

While historical records from the early church are limited, Mary and the women in general were instrumental in the formation of a synodal church through their witness, support, active participation, leadership, and exemplary faith. Their influence contributed to the rich diversity and

¹⁴ Elissa Roper, “Synodality: A Process Committed to Transformation,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 95, no. 4 (2018): 412.

¹⁵ Roper, “Synodality,” 412.

¹⁶ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, no. 3, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

¹⁷ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 1.

inclusive nature of the early Christian community, fostering an environment where synodality could thrive. It was always understood as the way of being an assembly, gathered in prayer to discern the Spirit's leading to guide their words and actions. It was therefore a way of journeying together and realizing the mission of the risen Lord. However, "Since the first centuries, the word 'synod' has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal, or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by."¹⁸

Based on the Greek word, *synodos*, it simply means, an assembly, a gathering with purpose and intentionality. The first gathering in the first chapter of Acts happened as they remembered the last words of Jesus while at table. "He had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. 'It is,' he had said 'what you have heard me speak about: John baptized with water but, not many days from now, you are going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:4–5). Then they will become witnesses even to earth's remotest end.

Theological Insights from the Cenacle Experience

Adapting the concept of "third space," a sociocultural term designating a communal space, as distinct from the home (first space) or work (second space), the Cenacle as a "third space" becomes a sphere or forum where individuals can experience a transformative sense of self, identity relationships, belongingness, and shared faith. For Mary and the women at the first assembly, the Cenacle became their "third space."¹⁹

We may recall the importance of the Cenacle in the event of the life of Jesus during his earthly life and before he enters into his passion. Jesus's

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," no. 4.

¹⁹ Third Space theory emerges from the sociocultural tradition in psychology identified with Lev Vygotsky. See Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (first published as *Thinking as Speech*), ed. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (MIT Press, 1962).

farewell meal with his disciples and the Pentecost event are two pivotal events in Christian theology, both of which took place in the same location—the Cenacle. By connecting these two events, we can re-imagine the church in several profound ways.

The Last Supper establishes the church as a Eucharistic community, united around the body and blood of Christ. Here, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, offering his disciples a way to remain in communion with him and each other. After his resurrection and ascension, the disciples return to the Cenacle to await the promised Advocate.

This promise is fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends, signifying God’s enduring presence and guidance. The church becomes the Spirit-filled body of Christ, empowered for mission. Pentecost transforms the fearful disciples into courageous witnesses, uniting them in purpose and sending them both to proclaim the gospel.

Considering these two significant events in the life of the church, there are several theological insights related to the Cenacle experience of the first assembly that deserve some discussion. They are interwoven; the discussion of one cannot be separated from the discussion of the others. These are: 1) birthing; a beginning; 2) remembering as a way of being in solidarity; 3) being “with one heart”; 4) praying, listening, and discerning; and 5) being in communion and in mission.

Birth: A Beginning

It was at Pentecost that the new church was born—a church whose missionary journey was and continues to be firmly strengthened by the Holy Spirit. It was the beginning of a new life and a new dispensation ushered in by the “advocate” Jesus had promised during his farewell discourses in John’s gospel. The symbolism of giving birth must not be lost as it gives us deeper insight about this new body of Christ, the church.

Giving birth is one of the most profound experiences a woman can have, rich with theological meaning. It symbolizes new beginnings and reminds us that growth and transformation often involve pain, struggle, and even the shadow of death. Jesus evokes this in John 16:21, likening the

suffering of childbirth to the joy that follows new life. Mary and the women at Pentecost deeply understood this metaphor, having experienced childbirth themselves. Mary's presence in the Cenacle reflects a posture of active "response-ability," ready to bring forth both the possible and the impossible. Through the Spirit, a new body—the church—is born, and Mary is no longer alone but united with the community, embodying the church's identity and mission. As a space of waiting, listening, and shared discernment, the Cenacle becomes a "third space" of synodality, where Mary models a relational and participatory way of being church.

Remembering: A Way of Being in Solidarity

The importance of memory in faith's understanding and in Christian experience now becomes clear, as well as the importance of remembrance for entering the mystery of the Cenacle. To possess a memory is to have a place in which to be rooted, a place from which to heal and to grow, a grounding from which coherence and understanding come. The constructive nature of memory, whereby elements of a prior experience are woven back together during recollection, also supports imagination, whereby elements of disparate prior experiences are woven together in novel ways.²⁰

A community requires for its existence and continuity a history, which is greatly aided in its consciousness by a memory.²¹ It is through shared memory that history and tradition are created. However, there is a troubling human tendency to forget or simply to gloss over difficult parts of our experience, especially those memories that are painful, sorrowful,

²⁰ Daniel L. Schacter, Donna Rose Addis, Demis Hassabis, Victoria C. Martin, R. Nathan Spreng, Karl K. Szpunar, "The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain," *Neuron* 76, no. 4 (November 2012): 677–694, doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2012.11.001.

²¹ John Markey, *Creating Communion: The Theology of the Constitution of the Church* (New City Press, 2003), 131. The author bases his discussion on the topic of communion using the insights of philosopher Josiah Royce who developed his mature philosophy around three central ideas: Spirit, community, and interpretation of signs.

disturbing, or traumatic. It requires courage and grace to face and accept them as part of our shared human experience and our historical reality.

Mary has a privileged role in the first church. The late esteemed Jesuit theologian Catalino Arevalo referred to Mary as the memory of the church because it was Mary who would constantly remind the infant church of Jesus.²² Arevalo emphasized that her privileged and unique position in the life of Jesus—the one who carried him in her womb, gave birth to him, and raised him, saw him and his mystery unfold as the years passed—gave her some kind of authority to be the memory regarding Jesus for the nascent church.²³ It is almost like she played “spiritual director” to the disciples in her prodding their memories of Jesus with them when they were so turned in on themselves.²⁴ This places Mary at the heart of the synodal church—one that walks together in listening, dialogue, and mutual discernment.

Being “With One Heart”

This expression “with one heart” refers to the bond of Christian love that united all those gathered as one community. In primitive human language, the heart designated the whole person, body, and soul, and signified its most intimate center. All human faculties find their harmony and unity in the heart.

The biblical heart is the center of one’s personality before God. It is the place of prayer where one enters into intimate relationship with God and exercises faith. As such, it is the place of discernment and human deliberation, where one makes Spirit-guided choices. It is in the “heart” where conscience awakens and grows, thus learning to distinguish right from wrong. Pondering thoughts and words in one’s heart, as Mary did (Luke 1:66; 2:19), means to value the experience deep within oneself or to consider it carefully with a profound awareness of the various movements of the heart that elicit a faith-filled response. The heart is not only related

²² Catalino Arevalo, “Triduum,” presented at the Cenacle Retreat House, Quezon City, May 23, 1997, 3.

²³ Arevalo, “Triduum,” 4.

²⁴ Arevalo, “Triduum,” 4.

to activities of the mind and the will, but also closely connected to our affective life, imagination, and memory.

Acts 1:14 tells us the disciples were “with one heart, constantly devoting themselves to prayer . . . with Mary the mother of Jesus.” This unity, as Luke describes, springs from prayer—the same kind of interior openness we see in Mary when, in the infancy narratives, she “treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Through profound moments like the annunciation and Jesus’s birth, Mary learned that prayer is the path to discerning God’s will through the Holy Spirit. Her reflective posture models the kind of discerning prayer that lies at the heart of synodality.

Just as Mary received Christ in prayer, now she supports the disciples in giving birth to the church through communal prayer. In both events—the Incarnation and the church’s beginning—Mary plays a unique and vital role, embodying the heart of a praying and discerning community.

Praying, Listening and Discerning: “All These Joined Constantly in Prayer”

We recall the gospel passage which says, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). Earlier, we saw that the place of prayer is the heart, where each person is one’s most authentic self. It is from the heart that we enter into an honest and open relationship with our self, with God, with others, and with the whole of God’s creation. It is in the heart that this relationship grows, deepens, and matures. It is also in the heart where we hold the tension between God’s perspective and plan and our human sin-tainted willfulness. Through prayer and contemplation, and the sharing of faith with one another, the Spirit of God enables us to feel with God and to share God’s attitudes, values, feelings, and emotions. Our capacity to see from God’s perspective enables us to see the events of our time as God sees them and to feel the same way about these events as God feels.

It is the Spirit who teaches us all things and leads us to the truth. There is therefore no discernment possible without prayer, without listening to the Spirit’s motions, in order to direct our will and our actions accordingly.

To discern individually or as a body, prayer awakens in us the capacity to identify the spirits that inhabit us at a given moment in our life or history. In spiritual discernment these various movements of the heart are sifted in order to know its origins and directions—is it from God and leading to God or from the opposing spirit leading away from God? The “heart” then, which is the seat of courage, wisdom, emotions, and will, is where we discern God’s will in all our options. It is where we are schooled in God’s love, and where we experience the joy of living the Gospel and passion to serve God and God’s people.

To be engaged in God’s mission, we must engage in critical thinking and discernment, allowing ourselves, as a fruit of contemplation, to be personally transformed. Why do we need to discern? As humans we can easily lose hope in the midst of death-dealing realities in the world we live in. Even the church is not immune from these realities. The process of hoping is bound up in the essence of what it means to be human, and all the capacities God endowed us in our humanity. We have the ability to choose to live with a sense of meaning sustained by hope. Theological reflection must be well-equipped to uncover narratives that advance our critical powers, our capacity to use our knowledge, imagination, intuition to distinguish what leads to death and destruction or to life and wholeness.²⁵ Such reflection offers hope in the midst of fear. Hope invites us to develop the discipline of critical thinking that leads to a discerned action-oriented response to despair and negativism. Critical thinking is essential in discernment. It spurs us to speak and act against the system of worldly domination that tends to destroy by interpreting the term domination as human appetite for power and wealth, rather than as the providential care God displays in creation and in salvation history.

Living our life in accordance with our Christian vocation calls for a discerning heart. We are confronted with choices between what promotes life and what leads to death every moment of our life as individuals and as

²⁵ Forrest Clinger, “Theologians as Interpreters—Not Prophets—in a Changing Climate,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2015): 346.

a Christian community. The contemporary French artist popularly known as Arcabas depicts Mary—in many of his paintings on the Pentecost scene—with an open book, either holding it or having it placed beside her or at her foot.²⁶ Drawing on tradition, Arcabas uses the open book to symbolize Jesus as the Word of God and Mary constantly connected with “the Book.” This explanation underlines for me the presence of Mary in both birthings: the first one—of Jesus in Bethlehem—and the second—the body of Christ in the Cenacle. Arcabas also made sure that in his Pentecost paintings there were women and people from different races present to symbolize the inclusivity and universality of the church. This vision resonates deeply with the theme of this conference: “Women on the Synodal Journey: Towards a More Authentic Catholic Church and World”—a call to recognize the vital role of women and the diverse people of God in shaping a church that truly reflects the breadth and richness of the body of Christ.

Being in Communion and in Mission

The concept of communion (*koinonia*) expresses the core mystery of the church.²⁷ It gives witness to a community that lives through the sharing of gifts and charisms inspired by the Spirit as an expression of God’s saving plan for the universal community.²⁸ The first assembly gathered at the Cenacle was convened by the Spirit for the sake of mission. Being in communion and in mission complete each other in our missionary journey. The apostles along with Mary and the other women received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the universal mission to proclaim the risen Christ to all the people (cf. Acts 2:1–40).

A community exists for a particular purpose. For the first community and for the church up to the present, it is the universal mission that the

²⁶ Arcabas’ real name is Jean-Marie Pirot (December 26, 1926–August 23, 2018). Arcabas was a name given to him by his pupils. One of his paintings is installed in 2005 at the Cenacle in Lyon, France.

²⁷ Markey, *Creating Communion*, 21.

²⁸ Markey, *Creating Communion*, 24.

risen Christ entrusted his followers that is the *raison d'être* of their existence. What distinguishes them from other communities? It is love that Jesus showed them through his words and deeds, which culminated in his paschal sacrifice, which set them apart from other groups. The strength of their bonds must continue to evolve in time and space as they deepen their relationship with God and with one another. Christian history attests that as the followers of the way spread to “earth’s remotest ends” (Acts 1:8b), to proclaim the good news, they strengthen as they cope together, taking risks, exploring new paths, and collaborating with each other to fulfill the mission Jesus gave them, always bonded together by God’s love.

Theologian John Markey turns to philosopher Josiah Royce, who remarks that: “The ability to ‘see one’s life in terms of a greater communal and, finally, cosmological whole, gives individuals the ability to widen and expand their own lives by consciously and freely participating in a community of memory and hope greater than the physical and biological limits that life naturally imposes on us.’”²⁹ The whole community must share a way of communicating with one another on basic values and beliefs, and a method and tradition of communal discourse that has emerged over time and remains both shared and open-ended.³⁰ Genuine community must have a common space where members can share and discern between “views of life” and “ways of life.”³¹ Sharing and discerning together help a community establish solidarity with one another and with those to whom they are sent to proclaim the good news.

Synodality must therefore be interpreted more fully in terms of communion, as a way of journeying together as a community of faith along the missionary path. “This understanding of ecclesial life is a key metaphor for the paradigm of synodality and provides the many aspects of journeying as appropriate to Christian corporate living: planning,

²⁹ Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133.

³⁰ Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133.

³¹ Markey, *Creating Communion*, 133. Here the author agrees with Royce on this particular element of a genuine community.

dreaming, packing, worrying, walking, conversing, listening, observing.”³² For the ecclesial life to undergo a transformation, preparation and formation must be taken seriously by all.

Mary in the Acts of the Apostles

Before we look more closely at Mary in the Acts of the Apostles, it would be beneficial for us to recall Mary’s intimate encounters with the Holy Spirit in the gospels. In our synodal journey, Mary models for us how to listen and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit who guided her in her vocation as mother and disciple of Christ. We recall the Annunciation where she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:28) that she conceived Jesus in her womb and was later led by the same Holy Spirit to visit her cousin Elizabeth and proclaimed the Magnificat, the Presentation of Jesus in the temple and other events in the life of her son.

Mary appears only once in Acts, to be there at Pentecost, the culmination of all the events where she and the first assembly awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. She needed to be there as she is the one who knows and recognizes the Holy Spirit; therefore, in some way she is a touchstone for discernment, and she is certainly there as the guide for discipleship. Her role, like the role of other women in Acts, is limited as a result of Luke’s emphasis on the ministries of Peter and especially Paul, which for him embody the movement of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, and on the symbolic importance of the “twelve” apostles representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Mary’s role in Acts is a parallel of her role in the Lukan infancy narrative. Although it establishes Luke’s particular emphasis on the limited role of women in the accomplishment of his purposes in Acts, the image and role of Mary nonetheless manage to assert themselves even through the limited texts given us by the evangelist.

The opening verse of Acts (1:12) connects the event of Jesus’ ascension as witnessed by his disciples after his last instructions to them (1:6–11) and

³² Roper, “Synodality,” 416.

situates them at the upper room in Jerusalem where they were staying.³³ Although tradition locates the events of the Last Supper and Pentecost in the same upper room, there is no solid evidence that the Cenacle (upper room) in Acts is the same Cenacle in the Last Supper event. Nevertheless, it is at an “upper room” in Jerusalem where men and women disciples gathered together in prayer after witnessing the ascension of Jesus in heaven. But only the men, especially the remaining eleven of the Twelve apostles (1:13), are named. Of the women who are gathered with them, only Mary is identified by name. She is “Mary the mother of Jesus” (1:14). The anonymity of the remaining women suggests that they do not have equal standing with men in this gathering.³⁴ Perhaps we can ask, why is Mary, of all the women present in the assembly, the only one identified? And why is it significant for Luke to mention her by name? Does this mean that she has an equal standing with the men disciples in this gathering? What picture of Mary does the author portray in this scene? Again, we can only begin to answer these questions within the context of Luke’s theological intention and the literary structure of the beginning of his first and second books, the gospel and Acts.

This pericope does not give us further descriptions of Mary nor her role in the assembly. From the statement in Acts 1:14—“All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers”—no specific role is given her, as all of them are engaged in the same activity, that of prayer. After this event describing her in prayer with the gathering of believers, she remains silent and invisible in the preaching of the apostles and disciples. Even Paul is surprisingly silent about her except for an

³³ For many, it was natural to assume that the upper room referred to in this verse of Acts is the same one in which Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples (Mark 14:15), but this is an unreliable tradition. Biblical archaeologists assert that the location of the upper room where the Last Supper was held is not clear. Most probably, the supper was held somewhere within the city walls.

³⁴ Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, expanded ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 307. Acts 1:21–26 makes the inequality between men and women even clearer: only a man can be elected to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle.

allusion to her in Galatians 4:4 in mentioning that Christ was born of a woman.

This silence and invisibility seem to reveal that she had no direct place in the community after the Pentecost event, that she did not impose herself nor claim any rights or favors as the mother of Jesus, that she did not carry out any teaching or preaching office, and that she did not even appear as a privileged source of revelation about the intimate life of Jesus.³⁵ Furthermore, this silence reveals that “to be the mother of Jesus was not a special title of honor nor an essential element of Christological faith for the first witnesses to the faith.”³⁶

In mentioning her name in the midst of the infant church in Acts, Luke therefore proposes her as a model for all believers. As she made possible the birth of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, so also, she takes part in the parallel birth of the church through the Holy Spirit. But these two births were not without pain and struggle. She did not breeze through life as if she were not a human being. Her faith, like our own, had to be tested in time through many difficult and anxiety-laden events. As a human being, she was subject to the same doubts and obscurities as many of us are. Because of the person that she was and is, we continue to identify with her in our own continuing struggles of faith. In the Cenacle scene, we finally have an image of her as one who has weathered through life, as one who can look back at her life and experiences without any regrets or despair but with gratitude and peace, of one who can willingly share her rich memory of her son’s life and of her relationship with him to a young still fragile church. Fading into the background, we are left with an image of a woman who has finally come to her own and has found peace and joy in the fulfillment of her role, a woman who perhaps remained active in the church without drawing attention to herself but instead finds peace and happiness in the attention to Christ and his body, the new community of believers.

³⁵ Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God: A Synthesis of Mariology* (Claretian Publications, 1990), 18.

³⁶ Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God*, 18.

In reflecting on the significance of Mary in the church from its beginnings, chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium* discusses her role in the mystery of Christ and the church, presenting her as an integral part of the church's identity, mission, and future. The document underscores Mary's unique participation in the history of salvation. She is seen as the one who brought Christ into the world and, by her cooperation in the divine plan, continues to play a vital role in the salvation of humanity. This makes her a model for the church's mission to bring Christ to the world. Thus, she is both a model and a mother to the church, embodying its faith, hope, and unity. Just as Mary is the mother of Christ, she is also the mother of all Christians, symbolizing the nurturing and protective nature of the church towards its members. The church venerates Mary not only because of her unique role in the history of salvation but also because she represents what the church itself is called to be.³⁷

From the perspective of today's women who experience exclusion and marginalization in church and society, reading Mary's role in Acts and how the church regards her in *Lumen Gentium* gives them a sense of hope that through their faithfulness, vigilance, and efforts in raising the consciousness of other women and men in the church, women may be recognized as equal partners in the service of the church. The scant information about Mary's life, the silence about her in significant events of her son's life, and her invisibility from the church after its inauguration in Acts connect her with most women from our biblical past until the present whose stories or contributions to the spreading and proclamation of the gospels have not been preserved or may not be recognized.

The call of Pope Francis for the church to become more synodal through the leading and action of the Holy Spirit, the way the infant church in Acts was, is a welcome development for the twenty-first century church. Just as the Second Vatican Council called for an updating of the church in order to be relevant to the modern world, we need to harness the original intention of the Holy Spirit that as God's people. We need to listen

³⁷ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 62–64.

to one another in our journey together as a community of faith in mission. Referring to the synodal process, Pope Francis understands it as “not just a momentary event but a continuous journey, one in which the church learns to better understand herself and discern the most effective ways to carry out her mission.” He described the synodal Assembly as “a ‘plural subject,’ where bishops, laypeople, priests, and consecrated men and women work together in service to God’s mercy.”³⁸

Mary and Women in the Synodal Model of Church

We have much to hope as we retrieve the memory of the early church in her experience of synodality as the people of God and as the body of Christ in our world today. Based on our rereading of Acts 1:13–14, it is important to note that Luke intentionally mentions the presence of Mary and the women amid the brethren to mark their significant role in the life of the early church. Synodality of the church has a deep root in the Cenacle event, where all present—women and men of the early church—gathered, shared, prayed, waited, and missioned. This gathering is the context from which we understand synodality, a way of journeying together as a community of faith with a mission. From that first gathering, synodality has become a form of governance where decision-making involves active participation and consultation among all—bishops, clergy, laity, women and men, young and old, from different life backgrounds and contexts. The goal is to promote collaboration, communion, consensus-building, and the collective discernment of important issues within the church. Synods are gatherings or assemblies where representatives discuss matters of faith, doctrine, and pastoral concerns in an atmosphere of listening and prayer, to address the needs of the faithful and guide the church’s direction.

³⁸ “Pope Calls for Humble and Synodal Church, Led by the Holy Spirit,” *Vatican News*, October 2, 2024, vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-10/pope-francis-address-synod-2-october-2024-second-session.html.

The first assembly at the Cenacle serves as a model or paradigm that needs to be adapted to best serve the universal mission Christ has entrusted to his followers. As a model or paradigm, we can learn from Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where he refers to the notion of “paradigm” as an accepted model of interpretation or model of understanding.³⁹ The interpretation of an accepted model shifts (giving rise to the term “paradigm-shift”) as it undergoes a longer process of understanding and adapting to changing consciousness. This theory enables us to comprehend more the challenges brought about by growth in knowledge and human consciousness, development, progress, and the emergence of new approaches with reference to theology and spirituality.

When we use the term “paradigm shift” based on Kuhn’s original meaning of paradigms as models of interpretation centered on an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by members of a shared community, there is never a question of total break or discontinuity, but rather a fundamental continuity.⁴⁰ We continue to look at the same world but from different perspectives and based on our renewed understanding of the original model. In synodality, the divine perspective born out of prayer and contemplation is essential in following the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The synodal model of the assembly at the Cenacle is one that must undergo a renewed understanding. In the formation of a synodal church, Mary and the women played significant roles in various ways. However, their roles were limited to conform with the pervading understanding of the status and the role of women in the culture of that time. Yes, the potentials were there of what we now know as “synodality”—where all members, no matter what their gender or positions are in the church—journey together in discerning the direction and the leading of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling the mission Jesus has entrusted to the members of the first assembly. However, these gifts and potentials the Spirit poured down

³⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18–19.

⁴⁰ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94.

upon the first assembly need to be reclaimed and developed to their maturity and fullness according to the designs and intentions of the Holy Spirit in the service of Christ's mission. In reclaiming these potential points and developing them, we need to apply a paradigm-shift in adapting a model that provides a guide for our continuing journey as a people of God. This is precisely what the synodal model of the first assembly in Acts is presenting us for further development.

In the Cenacle, the roles of Mary and the women in the synodal space of the infant church can be gleaned in the following:

- As witnesses to Christ's teachings: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and other women who followed Jesus during his ministry were witnesses to his teachings, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. Their first-hand experiences and deep understanding of Jesus's message were invaluable in shaping the early Christian community's beliefs and values. All those gathered listened to and shared with one another, their experiences of Jesus, their understanding of the teachings of Jesus, their faith in the person of Jesus. Together they built a community of one heart.
- As in the culture at that time, the women also played a supportive role during synodal gatherings: providing hospitality, logistical support, and contributing to the overall well-being of the community members during these gatherings.
- They were not passive observers, but active participants in the church: Mary and some women disciples were active participants in the early Christian community. They were part of the wider group that came together to pray and discern the church's direction, especially after Jesus's ascension.
- They became symbols of discipleship and devotion: Mary's unwavering faith and commitment to Christ served as a symbol of

discipleship and devotion for the early Christians. Her example inspired many to deepen their faith and actively participate in the life of the church.

- They gave witness as examples of leadership and faith: Some women in the early church, like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia,⁴¹ were recognized for their leadership and contributions to the Christian community. They played important roles, often alongside their husbands as in the case of Priscilla and Junia, in teaching, mentoring, and supporting others in their faith journey.

It is clear that synodality was the form and style of the early church. However, we are urged to “return to the sources”—*ressourcement*⁴²—to recover the original model of the church, without renouncing any of the great advances of the church in the second millennium.⁴³ We are standing at the crossroads, an evolutionary point of “what has been” and “what is to come,” which keeps the dream of being truly church alive. For women and those in the margins, this is indeed a source of hope. Pope Francis at the conclusion of the first session of the Synod of Bishops commented on his dream of a synodal church: “This is the Church we are called to ‘dream’: a Church that is the servant of all, the servant of the least of our brothers and sisters; a Church that . . . welcomes, serves, loves, forgives; a

⁴¹ In Romans 16:7, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junia(s). Historically, there has been much discussion regarding the gender of Junia/Junias as well as the meaning of the phrase regarding apostleship. John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, noted Junia as named among the apostles. Many of Chrysostom’s contemporaries interpreted Junias as a man’s name, a matter that biblical scholars still debate to some extent today, although the feminine identification is more common.

⁴² Theologians Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar inspired a renaissance in the twentieth-century Catholic theology and initiated a movement for renewal that made a decisive contribution to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

⁴³ Andrea Tournelli, “Interview with Cardinal Grech, the Secretary of the Synod of Bishops: ‘Synodality is the Form that Realizes the Participation of All the People of God in Mission,’” *Vatican News*, July 21, 2021, [vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-07/cardinal-grech-synod-synodality-interview-communion.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-07/cardinal-grech-synod-synodality-interview-communion.html).

Church with open doors that is a haven of mercy.”⁴⁴ With the full fruit of the process not yet seen, he is encouraging everyone to look to the horizon opening up for the church and added: “The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missionary Church, a Church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

Mary and the women at the first assembly surely never imagined that after two millennia, women will be standing alongside men in doing theology and contributing their personal charisms to the ongoing missionary journey of the church. We know that there is still much to be done to realize more fully the dream of a synodal church according to the plan of the Holy Spirit. Dreams are realized in time even with unexpected twists and turns of events in human history. However, we must not cease dreaming—trying and making things happen, albeit unsuccessful at times—to find our equal place in the Cenacle assembly of today. Synodality is giving us hope that as we reclaim the important counter-cultural contribution of Mary and the women in the early church, we can do our part in our own places and spaces of mission.

We are challenged to recreate the Cenacle symbolic place and theological space as a “third space” especially for women and those in the margins of church and society. Like the Cenacle experience of the early church, where women disciples found themselves belonging to the body of Christ, we need to recreate and develop further this new beginning, like a new “Pentecost” according to the calls and demands of today’s world. The communique approved by Pope Francis states, “The fullness of the synodal process can only truly exist if the local Churches are involved [in

⁴⁴ Carol Glatz, “Pope Francis Closes Synod With ‘Dream’ of a Church With Open Doors,” *NCR Online*, October 29, 2023, ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/pope-francis-closes-synod-dream-Church-open-doors.

⁴⁵ Glatz, “Pope Francis Closes Synod.”

that process.”⁴⁶ The “third space” is realized whenever spaces are opened up in the church and other church-related institutions. Whenever and wherever possible, these “third spaces” allow and encourage women to gather, and together share life experiences and memories, understanding them from the perspective of faith and spirituality, and to build a community of love and acceptance. From this space of solidarity and communion, we can continue to journey together in realizing the dream of a more synodal and missionary church.

The Synod on Synodality is just the beginning of a new “Pentecost” where a “third space” is opened for all to participate in having their voices heard and in proclaiming the good news to all! The journey toward a synodal church needs to continue to allow the Holy Spirit to recreate the church anew for today. Synodality has given fresh hope for the people of God, especially for women. Announced earlier before the conclusion of the October 2023 synodal assembly, Pope Francis gave voting rights to seventy lay people and consecrated religious, with women comprising 50 percent of those appointed. This is the first time in history when women were included as voting members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Even if women’s role in general would still be supportive, this first session of the Synod showed that women’s voices were heard in the different tables and in the plenary. To continue journeying together, women need to adapt the “third space” theory, where women and marginalized groups are given a space to express in their own way how they experienced the complexities of social exclusion and inclusion and to introduce initiatives in church and society that will effectively ameliorate exclusion of those on the margins.

Luke may have limited the role of women in the early church in accordance with the culture of the period. But the Holy Spirit continues to encourage, inspire, and bring about renewal and transformation despite opposition and centuries-old established systems and mindsets. Today we are challenged not to allow these limits to hinder our rights as women to

⁴⁶ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, no. 4.2, synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

have our voices heard, albeit in a unique way, showing our self-understanding as women with equal dignity and created in God's image and likeness.

As we continue to evolve as church in the twenty-first century, we put ourselves at the crossroads of "what has been" and "what is to come" and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us forward. We are called to contribute to the building up of the church in our own unique way as women, discovering and using our God-given gifts as an integral part of church and not simply a caricature of the masculine way of living our Christian vocation. The Cenacle as a synodal space during the founding of the first Christian community can be likened to the "third space" of today, where there is opportunity to listen to the voices of each other to grow in understanding the different perspectives brought into focus by a community of faith. It is a space of birthing, of listening, of prayer and discernment. It is a space of communion and mission as in the first Cenacle.

The twenty-first century Cenacle is a church which is also the school of the heart that allows the Christian community to experience their hearts being transformed more and more into the heart of Christ so that as pilgrim people we become as Christ is to the world: Christ with a listening and welcoming heart, Christ in communion and in solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable, and Christ constantly journeying with us. As church, we are invited to conform to the heart of Jesus Christ as Mary did, so that with Saint Paul we can truly proclaim, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

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3. Dalit Women Celebrating a Synodal Third Space like Mary

Nelavala Gnana Prasuna

A synodal third space is a venue of debate, discernment, and mutual learning in which all are welcomed as co-responsible members of the church. It has been women's strong contributions and selfless efforts that have kept Christianity alive and present in society throughout history. Following in the footsteps of women who have courageously carved out space in both church and society, I seek to contribute to the ongoing discourse on synodality, agency and third space as sites of divine revelation and transformation. Writing from the intersection of my multiple identities as a Dalit, Lutheran, Christian, feminist, ordained minister, theologian, and theological educator, I situate this work within the lived experiences and theological insights that emerge from the margins.

In this chapter, I take the biography of Lutheran woman Bishop Aliveli S. Katakshamma alongside my own life story to illustrate how we celebrate the synodal third space in the Indian setting. Other women scholars and activists like Monica Melanchthon, Surekha Nelavala, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Bishop Pushpa Lalitha, Ruth Manorama, Cynthia Stephen, Sister Celia, Aruna Gnanadason, Priscilla Singh, and many others have made significant and visible contributions to the lives of women and the church in India by engaging third spaces as transformative loci. These third spaces have served as critical sites from which they challenge dominant structures and advocate for the empowerment and liberation of marginalized communities, particularly women echoing Pope Francis's vision of "the synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer, and in dialogue with the

Word of God.”¹ Adding to this, I argue that synodal spaces must also become inclusive and empowering spaces for women. Such spaces are not only safe but generative, enabling women to realize and exercise their full potential by participating meaningfully in the decision-making processes of the church, thereby contributing to its holistic growth and transformation.

My hermeneutical engagement with the church and the Bible is inspired by Dalit women’s experiences of shame, untouchability, exclusion, and marginalization in a strongly politicized and divided Indian society. The experiences of women have become a benchmark for the interpretation of the Bible in feminist theology, frequently with the goal of liberating the church and the Bible as well as its readers and interpreters from patriarchal domination. This chapter asserts that women played a larger part in the early years of the church’s development not only as chief leaders but also by using any platform which can be named as third-space.

From a Dalit feminist theological angle, I engage with Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose contributions toward the growth of the church are evident through her presence in various occasions and spaces throughout the gospel narratives. John’s gospel portrays Mary as an active participant in events such as the wedding at Cana and the foot of the cross, and his portrayal establishes her as a formative theological agency in the early Jesus movement. Drawing similarities with the lived experiences of Dalit women who have historically contributed to and continue to shape the Indian church’s life and witness, this study tries to highlight the often-overlooked narrative of Mary’s contribution in ecclesial history. While women like Mary played important roles in the establishment and construction of the early church, their contributions are frequently overlooked in synodal epistemologies and the greater historiography of Christianity. Thus, this chapter aspires to provide a framework for reversing the dominant hierarchical exclusive systems of the church towards peaceful coexistence by sharing the experiences of Dalit women and drawing parallels with

¹ Pope Francis, “Homily at the Opening of the Synodal Path,” October 10, 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html).

Mary's leadership in using spaces both within and outside the church as third-spaces.

Using the Synodal third space framework, this chapter emphasizes Mary's voice and compassionate intervention at the wedding at Cana, interpreting the event as a theologically significant moment situated within a third space that is frequently overlooked in dominant exegetical traditions. The wedding at Cana in Galilee marks the first public revelation of Jesus's glory in the Gospel of John, where a moment of social crisis—the shortage of wine—is transformed into an act of divine abundance. This event takes place in what this study refers to as a third space, a liminal and community location outside of religious and political power centres. This event marks the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. The role of Jesus's mother needs an attention in this moment, since she not only draws Jesus's attention to the situation of crisis but also creates space for his mission to emerge. Her actions, both in recognizing the deficiency and directing the servants to do what Jesus tells them, identify her as an active agent both in allowing Jesus to unveil his identity and mission and in contributing to the transition from scarcity to heavenly plenty in the context of third space.

Third Space as a Communitarian Space

In this chapter, I take “third space” as a space that generates communities that are egalitarian and inclusive. As popularized by Ray Oldenburg, third space refers to a place that is neither home (first space) nor work (second space) but a neutral, communal area where people gather, share life and stories, and form relationships outside the structures of family and work. These are the places where authentic community, conversation, and creativity can emerge. Oldenburg, in his work *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, explains the concept of three “places” or social environments: the home as the first place, work as the second place, and informal public gathering spaces as the third space. Oldenburg's central contribution is actually the concept of the third place—the informal, communal spaces that are essential for civil society,

democracy, and community building.² Oldenburg's concept of the third place invites us to consider how informal gatherings at coffee shops, libraries, community functions, and parks, and so forth, might serve as sanctuaries of belonging for those excluded. Third places are spaces which provide opportunities for people to meet and interact and to develop a sense of belonging. Oldenburg identifies eight unique characteristics of third place: 1) neutral ground or a common meeting place; 2) levellers or places that encourage, and are inclusive of, social and cultural diversity; 3) places that are easy to access and accommodate various sedentary and active activities; 4) places (with) champions or regular patrons; 5) low profile and informal places; 6) places which foster a playful atmosphere; 7) a home away from home; and 8) a place where conversation is the primary activity.³

In a similar vein, Brian Sanders proposes that the church can function simultaneously as both a first place and a third place, intimate like a home, yet open and communitarian like a shared public space. Drawing on Oldenburg's concept of the third place, Sanders challenges the church to reclaim its spatial and missional identity as inherently interconnected. Grounding his vision in Acts 2:42–47, he highlights how the early Christian community gathered in homes (first place) to pray, share meals, and hold their possessions in common. At the same time, they gathered in public places such as the temple courts, embodying their third place a site of mission and witness. For the early church, sacred space was not fixed or institutional but was defined by relational presence and the indwelling of the divine. This fluid understanding of sacredness is underscored by Jesus's teaching: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), a statement that radically democratizes and

² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Prentice Hall, 1991), 144.

³ Caryl Bosman and Joanne Dolley, "Rethinking Third Places and Community Building," in *Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building*, ed. Joanne Dolley and Caryl Bosman (Edward Elgar, 2019), 2.

decentralizes the concept of sacred space.⁴ However, the term “sacred” has frequently been used to exclude people in India based on gender, caste, and class.⁵

This chapter, drawing on the concept of the third space, contends that the church should no longer be confined to a physical building. Instead, the church is embodied in the rhythms of daily life found in ordinary spaces such as homes, coffee shops, streets, shared meals, online forums, and various family or public gatherings. As a third space, the church exists beyond the traditional boundaries of the home (first place) and formal worship settings (second place). It becomes a missional centre where people encounter love, justice, and joy. Within this vision, God’s presence permeates unconventional, everyday environments, transforming both domestic and public spaces into sacred and prophetic realms.

⁴ Brian Sanders, *Life After Church: God’s Call to Disillusioned Christians* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 175–177.

⁵ The hierarchical caste system in India, which derives its legitimacy from religious concepts of pollution and purity, is a major factor in the exclusion of women, Dalits, and Adivasis (tribals). Due to the work they engage in and their places of birth, Dalits and Adivasis are labelled as “impure” or “polluting” by dominant caste ideas, which are frequently supported by Hindu Brahmanical texts and social norms. While women of all religions and castes experience prohibitions from locations considered “sacred,” such as prayer rooms in many mosques or altars in churches for reasons of menstruation, women, particularly from the marginalized communities, experience double or triple marginalization for their skin color and other social issues. Silencing the voices and presence of these excluded groups in both the public and spiritual domains, the politics of purity remains an instrument of religious exclusion and social control. In addition to Hindu caste systems, the exclusion of women, Dalits, and Adivasis occurs in religious establishments such as churches and masjids, which frequently perpetuate prevailing cultural ideas of pollution and purity. These forms of exclusion are maintained through interpretations of religious texts and traditions that reinforce purity codes, stripping marginalized communities of full spiritual agency and visibility. See Soma Mandal, “Dalit Women as ‘Sexual Carriers’: Multiple Jeopardy of Caste, Shame, Stigma, and Pollution,” in *Shame and Gender in Transcultural Contexts: Resourceful Investigations*, ed. Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Helene Mayer (Springer Nature Switzerland: 2024), 178–179.

The Journey of My Life: A “Third Space” Experience

Born in a Dalit, Lutheran family I find that my childhood journey has been deeply shaped by experiences that I now recognize as third space experiences. These are the spaces where new identities and understandings were formed during my childhood amidst complex social dynamics. Most of my early years were spent in villages, where our home often became a church. At that time, there were no formal churches in the villages, so our home was transformed into a sacred space where worship and community thrived. My parents used to conduct Sunday worship services at home, instilling a spiritual rhythm in our family’s life. Christmas, New Year, Easter, birthday, and wedding anniversary celebrations became more than just celebrations; they were opportunities to welcome neighbours of all faiths and so-called high castes. I recollect a vivid memory from my younger days, when I was in the sixth grade, living in Irakam, an island where my parents worked as teachers. It was the occasion of my younger brother’s baptism, which was hosted in our home. The event was not merely a spiritual celebration but also a deeply significant social moment. Members of our family and extended family, along with neighbours including those from communities identified with the so-called high castes, gathered together to witness the baptismal service.

At the time, I was not fully aware of the caste structures that fragment and hierarchize Indian society. Yet, in retrospect, I recognize how, in that sacred moment, the rigid boundaries of caste seemed to dissolve, giving way to a shared sense of sanctity and fellowship. This early encounter left a lasting impression on me, revealing the capacity of Christian rituals to generate alternative, inclusive spaces where the dignity of every person is affirmed. Such moments resonate with what we now understand as a synodal third space—a space of encounter, participation, and mutual recognition cutting across the lines of exclusion. These gatherings enabled us to spread the gospel through hospitality and mutual respect, typically over a shared meal. At the same time, our neighbours warmly welcomed us to participate in their own ceremonial activities, building a culture of

mutual openness, fostering meaningful discourse, storytelling, and connection. These gatherings broke the lines between purity and pollution, touchable and untouchable, religious and cultural, self and other, and fostered a community that valued diversity and upheld dignity. In these dynamic third spaces, my strong identity, founded on faith, inclusivity, and mutual belonging, took shape in the warmth and openness of our home.

Unlike many of my Dalit sisters and brothers, I did not experience the direct pain of untouchability in the ways that continue to persist in village contexts even today.⁶ This was largely due to the elevated social status of my parents, who were school teachers, and we lived in rented homes located within caste-dominated neighbourhoods. Their profession and the strategic positioning of our residence provided a kind of social buffer, allowing us to partially transcend the immediate stigma commonly associated with caste.

Based on my personal experience and the findings of my doctoral field research involving three hundred women from the South Andhra Lutheran Church (the church to which I belong), I believe and affirm that conversion to Christianity, access to education, and employment opportunities are the most transformative tools for the emancipation and holistic development of Dalits in general, and Dalit women in particular, in the Indian context. These three pathways—spiritual transformation, intellectual, and economic participation—not only ensure but also constitute acts of resistance against caste and gender-based oppression. The testimonies of

⁶ In many Indian villages, the space is often divided into two parts: the main village and the colony. The main village is usually where the dominant or so-called upper-caste communities (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras) live. This area often has better roads, schools, temples, and facilities like water and electricity. The people living here usually have power and control over village decisions. The village area is considered as pure and sacred. The colony, on the other hand, is where Dalit or marginalized communities live. It is usually located on the outskirts of the main village and often lacks good infrastructure. In many places, colonies have separate water taps, schools, or even burial grounds. This separation is a result of the caste system and the practice of untouchability, even though it is banned by law. The colony is considered as dirty and impure place. Today, many people from the colony are fighting for justice and dignity, and churches and movements are working to make these places more equal and inclusive.

the women whom I interviewed demonstrate that the convergence of faith, knowledge, and work can create transformative agency and cultivate new identities founded on dignity, equality, and hope.⁷

As a child, I was not aware of how the concepts of purity and defilement, as well as the unwritten laws of touchability and untouchability, determined who belonged to a respectable community and who was marginalized. Only in retrospect, in the light of my experiences as a Dalit theologian, I have come to understand how synodal third-space epistemology can serve as an antidote to traditions and customs that are oppressive. This becomes especially meaningful as it offers a framework that values such spaces as sites of lived theology, where voices from the margins, particularly women's voices, are not only heard but honoured. In these spaces, stories of struggle and affirmation can emerge, demonstrating that women are more than just passive objects of social convention. Rather, they actively contribute to the development of community, creating meaning, and forging new and life-giving ways that confront exclusion and reimagine belonging.

In my formative years, I was raised within the Christian faith under a framework of disciplined practice. Later, our family relocated to a city parish in Sullurpet, a shift that provided an environment where my faith was both nurtured and deepened, eventually leading me toward roles of leadership.⁸ I actively participated in church life, engaging in activities such as Sunday school, youth programs, Women Maha Samaj (Women's Conferences) gatherings, and supporting my family's faith practices. These spiritual engagements were foundational to my identity formation and have remained influential throughout my life.

My university and theological education provided a structure for these experiences, allowing them to take on a more nuanced intellectual dimension. The South Andhra Lutheran Church, my spiritual community,

⁷ For further details, see Nelavala Gnana Prasuna, *Engendering the Divine Image: Conversations with Dalit Women's Experience* (Christian Imprints, 2020).

⁸ Sullurpet is a place in Andhra Pradesh, South India, where my family belonged to the St. Michael's Lutheran Church.

played a central role in shaping my growth. I was raised with the assurance that Jesus is the liberator, a saviour who redeems humanity from sin. This conviction took root in my childhood, evolved through adolescence, and continued to mature into adulthood. Alongside this faith, a calling to serve both the Lord and the women in my community also grew within me, deepening my commitment to ministry and service. During my postgraduate studies, I discerned a profound inner call to pursue full-time ministry. With the support and blessings of my church and family, I commenced my theological education at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in 1989, enrolling in the Bachelor of Divinity program, which I completed in 1993. After nearly two decades of theological training and preparation, my longstanding aspiration to be ordained was finally realized. January 12, 2011, holds particular significance for me, as it marks both my ordination and a reaffirmation of my calling to pastoral ministry. On this momentous day, I was ordained alongside three other remarkable women—Rev. Vijaya Kumari, Rev. Smitha Das, and Rev. K. Sirisha. The women of the South Andhra Lutheran Church (SALC) celebrated this milestone with great joy, honouring each of us as newly ordained ministers. This shared celebration underscored the importance of our journey and the expanding role of women in the ministry of our church.

My long-awaited aspiration to become a pastor was finally realized in December 2015, three years after my ordination, when I was appointed to serve in a parish. As pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Satyavedu, I quickly understood that this marked the beginning of a profound journey. The moment was charged with mixed emotions both anxiety and accomplishment. I was deeply moved by the congregation's warm and enthusiastic welcome, especially considering the prevailing gender disparities in both society and the church. From the outset, the congregation has been a tremendous source of support in my pastoral endeavours.

Against the backdrop of my life story, I see that for Dalit women, whose lives are often marked by intersecting forms of caste, gender, and class-

based oppression, third spaces become essential sanctuaries of resistance and renewal. These are frequently community gatherings, prayer circles, kitchens, courtyards, or other spaces where people come together to develop bonds, share experiences, and establish collective agency rather than being formal organizations. In these settings, Dalit women frequently voice their theological perspectives, which are based on survival, dignity, and liberation, outside of the prevailing frameworks that have traditionally suppressed or erased them. These embodied experiences when seen from the synodal third-space epistemology become essential for understanding and transformation. In doing so, synodal third space resists colonial and hierarchical conceptions of truth and embraces communal, dialogical, and Spirit-led discernment in which even the most marginalized voices, especially Dalit women, are acknowledged, and they become agents of hope and bearers of divine wisdom.

Mary's Agency in the Third Space (John 2:1–12)

When reinterpreting the episode of the wedding at Cana, several important questions arise about how we understand the portrayal of Jesus and his mother, beyond the miracle of turning water into wine. For instance, how should we interpret Jesus's apparently insensitive response to his mother's concern about the lack of wine (John 2:3–4)? Does this suggest a hassled relationship between them? How close is the bond between Jesus and his mother? While addressing these questions requires multiple interpretive approaches, this chapter does not explore them all. Instead, it focuses specifically on a Dalit feminist perspective, highlighting and celebrating the agency of Jesus's mother as she transforms a moment of lack into one of abundance within a third space.

The setting of Cana itself, which is neither central nor peripheral, serves as a theological third space—a place where new opportunities arise. The first manifestation of heavenly glory occurs in this intermediate area, distant from Jerusalem's power centres and the religious elite. This indicates a ministry that would continuously elevate the underprivileged, overturn established hierarchies and bring abundance where there is

scarcity. A social space created by the wedding feast as a communal, celebratory setting where social roles converge. In this case Jesus's mother, exercises agency and insight, challenging patriarchal and hierarchical structures that frequently make women's voices unheard in public and theological discourses.

Transforming Lack into Life: Celebrating Mary's Agency

Although unnamed—among the four Evangelists, John alone never refers to Mary by her name—the mother of Jesus is introduced first in this passage, highlighting her central role in the unfolding events. She is referred to as “mother” by the narrator four times in these twelve verses, and again four times in her only other appearance in the Gospel, at the crucifixion (John 19:25–27). While the complete significance of her being both “woman” and “mother” becomes clear later, in this moment, her status as “the mother of Jesus” moves the narrative ahead. The narrator then observes that Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding, bringing together the essential players in a scene rich in symbolic resonance, evocative of a messianic meal and the unveiling of God's glory through speech and action. Narrative tension occurs when Mary identifies the scarcity and informs Jesus, “They have no wine.” The shortage indicates more than a logistical issue; it represents a social crisis, as running out of wine would have brought shame on the bridegroom and ruined the celebrations.⁹

For the Cana couple to run out of wine was disastrous. The text suggests that many were invited to wedding. John does not tell the readers why they ran out of wine. One can only assume that there might have been a great number of guests. Whatever the cause, it was a matter of great shame to the couple and to their families to have been unable to provide enough wine for celebrations. In such a crisis, Mary would have thought, her adult son can come to their rescue. It is as simple as it this: for example,

⁹ Sherri Brown, *Gift Upon Gift: Covenant Through Word in the Gospel of John* (Wipf and Stock, 2010), 114–115.

in our family functions, if food runs out when guests are still there, we will first share and discuss with our own intimate people to resolve the issue and support the hosts. Probably, Mary did something similar in this story. Urban von Wahlde suggests that her actions imply that she is well known to the family at Cana. It is also surprising, however, that she gives commands to the servants without consulting the bridegroom or the steward. Mary acts independently of Jesus. She expects Jesus to respond to her request even though he is initially reluctant to intervene.¹⁰ She may have been a close relative of the bridegroom, as she appears to have played more than just the role of a guest; she seemed to hold some responsibility in assisting the groom's family during the celebration. She knew, for example, that there was a lack of wine, which would normally have been handled discreetly so that guests were not aware of it. Her awareness and her initiative in addressing the problem suggest that she was involved in the hosting responsibilities. Furthermore, the different terminology used in verse 2 in reference to Mary (she was there) and to Jesus and his disciples (they were also invited) implies that Mary had a more active, possibly supervisory, role in the event. Whatever maybe the case, she notices that "they have no wine" and acts as an advocate on behalf of the couple and brings the issue to the notice of Jesus.

In his commentary on the Wedding of Cana (John 1:1–12), Pope John Paul II explains Mary's actions as Mediatrix in uniting humanity with her son Jesus:

Thus, there is a mediation: Mary places herself between her Son and [hu]mankind in the reality of their wants, needs, and sufferings. *She puts herself* "in the middle," that is to say *she acts as a mediatrix not an outsider, but in her position as mother*. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of [hu]mankind, and in fact, she "has the right" to do so. . . . *The Mother* of Christ presents herself as the *spokeswoman of her Son's will*, pointing out those things which must be

¹⁰ Susan Miller, *Women in John's Gospel* (T&T Clark, 2003), 22.

done so that the salvific power of the Messiah may be manifested.
(*Redemptoris Mater*, no. 21, emphases added)

Colleen Conway's gender-critical reading of the Gospel of John emphasizes the contrasting portrayals of men and women, noting that while male disciples frequently misunderstand or resist Jesus's mission, female figures like Mary, Jesus's mother, are depicted as perceptive and instrumental in pivotal theological moments. Mary's role at the wedding in Cana reflects this dynamic, as her intervention initiates Jesus's public ministry, establishing her as a theological agent rather than a passive figure. Conway says, "Unlike any other character in the narrative, apart from Jesus, she shares insight with the narrator. She is the character who perceives the problem and makes it known to Jesus."¹¹ Although her voice is silenced or marginalized in mainstream interpretations, particularly when Jesus's response is misinterpreted as a rebuke, this chapter emphasizes Mary as a catalyst for divine abundance, whose initiative at Cana launches Jesus's public ministry and reveals a theologically rich moment of manifestation. Her initiative in this third space, a community, social meeting outside of the temple or synagogue, exemplifies the theological richness of marginal, everyday locations where transformation occurs.

According to Adelin Fehribach, a reader in the first century who was familiar with the Hebrew Bible's depictions of significant mothers often suggest that Mary's statement about the wine shortage may be a calculated move to further her son's mission. This aligns with a recurring biblical pattern where mothers play a decisive role in shaping their sons' future.¹² Such maternal impact is also consistent with cultural dynamics in larger societal contexts, particularly in India, where mothers frequently act as catalysts in determining their children's futures. While I acknowledge

¹¹ Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 72.

¹² Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Gospel of John* (Liturgical Press, 1998), 26–28.

Fehribach's interpretation that Mary's mention of the wine shortage may have been a calculated move to further her son's mission, I argue that it was primarily her compassion that led her to recognize the deficiency and bring it to Jesus, her son, in the hope that he would resolve the crisis. That situation, in turn, paved the way for Jesus to reveal God's glory and begin his ministry.

In this sense, Mary's statement, "They have no wine" (John 2:3), can be interpreted as both a societal concern and a veiled hint about Jesus's public presentation. But Jesus's response "What concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4), appears to distance himself from both the immediate problem and his mother's implied prompting. This response is interpreted by many scholars as a tense or detached moment, implying that Jesus is refusing to bow to worldly or familial demands. Fehribach refers to J.A. du Rand and Charles Giblin, who state that, "when Jesus appears to be aloof and distant in his answers and exchanges with other characters in the Fourth Gospel, it is a signal that he is actually moving the discussion to a 'higher,' non-worldly level."¹³ Fehribach, drawing on a 'theology from below,' argues that the mother of Jesus bypasses her son's initial resistance without directly confronting him. She sees this moment as an opportunity to reassert her maternal role, refusing to let Jesus miss a chance to increase his honour in relation to the bridegroom.¹⁴ Building on Fehribach's reading, I would further argue that Mary's persistence is not merely about honour; she is determined not to let her son miss the opportunity to transform a situation of crisis into one of abundance, an act both in a compassionate and transformative manner.

Mary's observation "they have no wine" conveys volumes of sensitivity and concern for the needy. As noted by Elizabeth Johnson, "Mary stands among the people, herself a member of the group without wine, and speaks the hope of the needy. And that night the poor community of Cana in Galilee becomes the place where God's glory is made manifest as men and

¹³ Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 29.

¹⁴ Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 31.

women drink wine, make merry, and celebrate the wedding feast.”¹⁵ Scholars like Susan Miller argue that, the Old Testament prophets often refer to abundant wine as a sign of the new creation (Amos 9:13–14; Hosea 14:7; Jeremiah 31:12). At the Cana wedding, Jesus’s ability to provide the wine of the new creation points to his identity as the Messiah. His mother’s faith serves as an example to John’s readers that Jesus will come to their aid even if situation appears bleak. John’s repeated references to the “mother of Jesus” however, link Jesus’s earthly origins with Mary. The presence of the mother of Jesus highlights the humanity of Jesus in the midst of the account of a sign that reveals his glory.¹⁶ From this angle, she stands in solidarity with women and men around the world who struggle for social justice for themselves and their children and for the society at large.

Mary as Catalyst: The Intersection of Divine Revelation and Third Space at the Inauguration of Jesus’s Ministry

In the narrative of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11), Mary emerges as an active theological agent who discerns the social and spiritual deficiency symbolized by the absence of wine. Her perceptive intervention voiced in the profound words, “They have no wine,” leads to an unexpected abundance, transforming lack into plenitude. Her act is prophetic, anticipating divine generosity in spaces marked by scarcity—a theme that resonates deeply with the vision proclaimed in her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:44–55). There, she exalts a God who fills the hungry with good things and lifts up the lowly, revealing her theological insight into divine reversal and abundance. At Cana, this prophetic vision becomes embodied action, as Mary participates in ushering in a moment where the hidden glory of Jesus is revealed through extravagant grace in the midst of ordinary human need. Mary initiates a dialogue that catalyses Jesus’s first public sign, positioning herself as an agent within a liminal, third space where heavenly presence intersects with human need. In this communal setting of

¹⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (Continuum, 2006), 291.

¹⁶ Miller, *Women in John’s Gospel*, 25–27.

celebration, the third space becomes the site of divine revelation, abundance, and the inauguration of Jesus's public ministry. Mary is thus revealed not only as a mother but also as a theological catalyst in the unfolding of a new messianic moment, one that brings abundance in the new creation, especially within the context of the third space.

Apart from the miracle of turning water into wine, the Gospel of John presents the inauguration of Jesus of Nazareth's public ministry at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1). Through this evocative story, the evangelist introduces a series of symbols and signs that not only characterize the nature of Jesus's ministry but also unveil the essence of the messiahship of the Logos, as powerfully proclaimed in the prologue (John 1:1–18). This unique event is infused with themes like revelation, the messianic meal, water, wine, signs, "the hour," and the glory of the Son. Therefore, the first indication (2:11) refers to the early days of Jesus's public appearance. The evangelist writes to encourage and enhance his readers' confidence in the good news, the gift of truth that Jesus brings into the world (1:14–17). Significantly, the revelation of what faith involves begins not at a temple or synagogue but at a wedding feast—a liminal third space in the ordinary village of Cana in Galilee. Crucially, Jesus's mother initiates the moment of revelation by raising attention to the shortage of wine, allowing for divine intervention. In this respect, she plays an important part in unveiling Jesus's glory and igniting the start of his public ministry, serving as both an intercessor and a witness to the unfolding scene of divine abundance.

John presents mother of Jesus as a unique person in this pericope. John establishes the close relationship between Mary and Jesus as mother and son. John demonstrates Mary's influence upon Jesus, and he associates Mary with the purpose of Jesus's mission. Her intervention is also connected to a sign which leads to the faith of the disciples (2:11). The disciples recognize Jesus's identity as the Messiah and Son of God and believed in him at the Cana wedding. The mother of Jesus leads Jesus to

perform his first sign which looks forward to the abundance of the new creation.¹⁷

To celebrate Mary's act is to recognize and uplift the countless unnamed Dalit women who, like her, perceive the unspoken gaps in their communities and courageously speak into them. To celebrate Mary is also to create liturgies, spaces, and theologies that remember not just the miracle of water turned to wine, but the deeper miracle that a woman's voice became the catalyst for divine revelation. Dalit feminist theologians thus emphasize that transformation frequently starts on the periphery, in the mundane, unnoticed, and commonplace locations that serve as third spaces. These are the locations where the Spirit works through brokenness and resiliency, and where—via discernment, solidarity, and hope—transformation happens, and lack turns into life.

Dalit Feminist Reimagination of Church by Recreating the Cana Moment

In India, the status of a Dalit woman can be better understood through the words of feminist sociologist Gail Omvedt. She compares the Hindu caste structure to a pyramid of clay pots, with Brahmins at the top, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras, and outcastes at the bottom. Men are at the top of each clay pot, while women of their caste are at the bottom. Dalits are at the bottom, and Dalit women are even below, like crushed and discarded powder.¹⁸ Dalit women's identity in India is prescribed and ascribed by the dominant caste traditions and cultures. Dalit feminists affirm that Dalit women are "thrice oppressed," by untouchability, subordination, marginalization, inequities, exploitation, deprivation, and prejudice.¹⁹ However,

¹⁷ Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 28.

¹⁸ Aruna Gnanadason, "Dalit Women: The Dalit of the Dalit" in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1985). See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Sage, 2004).

¹⁹ Leo Sequeira, "Human Response to Dalit Women Today," in *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. P.G. Jogdand (Gyan, 1995), 121; Neelam Gorhe, "Social Development

educational programs and reservations have aided Dalit women in obtaining education and work, raising their standing and identity in society. Adding to that, conversion from Hinduism to Christianity has brought tremendous transformation in the lives of some sections of Dalit Christians. Dalit women of some Christian denominations have pursued theological education since the 1990s. Consequently, Dalit feminist theologians of these churches are emerging as a power, bringing transformation both in the church and society.

My contention is that women in the church are recreating the Cana moment by becoming a third space that is dynamic, inclusive, and a place where people are seen, heard, and transformed. By paying close attention to the community's needs, identifying what is lacking, and allowing God's presence to be shown through group action, pastors, especially women follow Mary. In particular, female pastors frequently contribute to caring, relational, and justice-focused leadership that reframes the church as a place of healing, communication, and emancipation. Women in ministry today echo Mary's leadership at Cana, creating sacred spaces not through authority alone, but through discernment, hospitality, and bold faith. Here I find deep connections with Mary's compassionate leadership and her selfless act of recognizing the lack and working to turn it into plenty.

My own pastoral journey has been dotted with Cana moments though not without challenges. I have found a sense of fulfilment in translating theological insights into language accessible to people of faith in everyday contexts, which allows me to address issues of justice as they arise. Celebration of special Sundays like Women's Sunday, Youth Sunday, family prayers, and family celebrations provide me with a space of inclusion and respect for marginalized individuals. For example, when one of our church members lost her husband, I was called upon to lead the memorial service. Seeing an opportunity to address harmful widowhood practices, I persuaded the then-lady president of the Parish Council

and Dalit Women," in *Dalit Women in India*, 147; Kumud Pawade, "The Life of a Dalit Woman," in *Dalit Women in India*, 157.

Committee (PCC) and other members to support me in abandoning hegemonic traditional practices that are frequently observed even in Christian contexts, such as breaking bangles, removing flowers (South Indian women often decorate their hair with flowers), wearing only white sari, or hiding her face (a common practice symbolizing misfortune). Despite some opposition from members, we were able to effectively challenge these conventions with the help of the church's office bearers. The woman who lost her husband and the family accepted our suggestion to forgo this tradition that pushes women into forced widowhood.

This was a landmark moment for the church, as we were able to take a significant step toward addressing enforced widowhood. After the service, a young woman shared her own painful experience, in which her bangles had been broken with the approval of a male pastor. Her story underscored the need for more women in ministry, where they have the potential to foster a third space within the church—a synodal space in which all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, transcending traditional boundaries and biases.

There are many other instances where women pastors can create Cana moments in ministry. In many parts of India, it is customary for families to host public thanksgiving celebrations when girls attain puberty. While such rituals mark a significant biological transition and are often framed as celebratory, they are also embedded within broader socio-religious frameworks that perpetuate menstrual stigma. Major religious traditions such as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam contain purity laws that have historically construed menstruating women as ritually impure, often resulting in social exclusion and internalized shame. I was invited by one member of the congregation to lead a prayer at such a celebration. Although personally I have reservations about participating in the public ritualization of puberty, I chose to use the occasion as a platform to challenge entrenched taboos around menstruation.

Drawing upon the biblical narrative of the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25–34), I offered a brief theological reflection that reframed menstruation not as impurity, but as a sign of life and divine

blessing. Drawing on the gospel story of the woman with the flow of blood, I emphasized that Jesus did not consider himself defiled when she touched him. Instead, power went out from Jesus into her while she was still menstruating. The narrative portrays a woman who, despite being marginalized due to her condition, actively seeks healing and is publicly affirmed by Jesus. Through this reinterpretation, I invited the gathering, which included individuals from various caste and religious backgrounds, to reconsider the dominant discourse surrounding menstrual blood. The positive reception of this message suggests that theological interventions can serve as effective tools in dismantling stigmatizing beliefs and affirming the sacredness of women's bodies.

The pastoral vocation has provided me with opportunities to freely discuss societal difficulties such as forced widowhood, caste issues, menstruation impurity, and gender discrimination, as well as to preach the gospel that provides fullness of life through joy, peace, harmony, and equality. Sometimes I feel deep gratitude at the end of the day, knowing that God had given me a tremendous opportunity to bring out the leadership potentials of both men and women. In the light of my own experiences, I reaffirm that women's entry into pastoral ministry offers a great chance to develop a synodal third space that encourages relational leadership, shared discernment, and inclusive involvement in church life. Women, who often face social and spiritual vulnerabilities, have found it easier to talk to me, particularly on sensitive personal and familial issues, precisely because I am a woman. This dynamic illustrates the unique pastoral gifts that women bring to ministry especially in areas such as pastoral counselling, emotional support, and relational care. Women pastors are well-positioned to foster the church as a third space of trust, healing, and empowerment. In doing so, they enable others, particularly marginalized individuals, to access the spiritual and emotional resources they need to live life in abundance and live more meaningful lives.

All the same, women's ordination and their entry into pulpit ministry does not ensure that all ordained women get a fair or dignified treatment. For example, The United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India

celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of women's ordination in September 12–15, 2022 at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College Campus, in Chennai, South India. Around a hundred pastors attended the celebrations from all over India. The four-day celebration was filled with joy and thanksgiving for cultural diversity and advancements, but also with sober moments when women pastors and theologically-trained women shared stories about the barriers they continue to face in their ministries. I was present in the celebrations. Many women shared that persistent challenges remain, including disparities in pay, transfers to remote areas, and the politicization of ordination processes. In some instances, women are ordained but are not entrusted with congregational leadership, effectively marginalizing their pastoral vocation. While acknowledging these issues which are rampant in the Indian church, I argue that the creation of a third space must also involve a commitment to structural justice and the full recognition of women's ministerial authority.

The life story of Aliveli S. Katakshamma, another Dalit Lutheran Christian woman, testifies to women overcoming structural constraints for exercising agency in the synodal third space. Katakshamma left her geographical home location and her worship community, the South Andhra Lutheran Church, though she was the daughter of Rev. Dr. Benjamin, the first Indian President of this Church. She was born in Renigunta (Tirupati), Chittoor District, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, South India. Katakshamma studied in Chennai, the capital of the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu, during the 1950s, and later worked as an English teacher in Andhra Pradesh. She then began mission work in Andhra Pradesh, where she received theological and pastoral training. She went to the United States, where she studied at the New York Theological Seminary and became the first woman to get a doctorate in theology from a Lutheran seminary, in Minnesota in 1968, at a time when opportunities for women to study such subjects were extremely rare in India. She held a number of significant positions in the Lutheran world. She served as the World Council of Churches' Commissioner for Faith and Order and as an

exchange visitor for women from the American Lutheran Church. After marrying Rev. Paul Raj who was pastoring a congregation of the South Andhra Lutheran Church, they both left their home church and established Good Samaritan Evangelical Lutheran Church (GSELC) in the tribal belt of the states Andhra Pradesh, Odissa, and Chhatisgarh in 1972. By 1982, the church had 50,000 baptized members.²⁰

Katakshamma was consecrated as bishop on October 27, 1996.²¹ The words of Bishop Katakshamma during her consecration ceremony offer significant theological and pastoral insight for the creation of synodal third spaces. Her affirmations challenge deeply ingrained gender biases and encourage the church to adopt a more inclusive and justice-oriented perspective. She stated, “Man and woman were made in the image of God. Therefore, rather than highlighting gender distinctions, our fundamental calling is to perform God’s work.” She added, “My church has taken a firm stand against male chauvinism It is time that male-dominated spaces everywhere encourage women to see themselves as equals.”²² These bold declarations reflect a commitment to dismantling patriarchal structures and reimagining the church as a space where shared leadership, equality, and mutual respect can flourish. By 2002, the church had become self-sufficient and without the financial support from national or international agencies; the church was able to organize programs from the resources available within the church. One of my students, Sabitha, who is doing her Master’s, hails from GSELC. In her words: “Bishop Katakshamma was a

²⁰ “Death of Asia’s First Woman Bishop Mourned by Indian Lutherans,” *UCA News*, November 6, 1997, ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1997/11/07/death-of-asias-first-woman-bishop-mourned-by-indian-lutherans&post_id=10346.

²¹ S. Sivanand, “A Lady with a Mission,” *Outlook India*, October 7, 1996, outlookindia.com/national/a-lady-with-a-mission-news-202322; “Woman Ordained Lutheran Bishop, Reportedly First Woman Bishop in Asia,” *UCA News*, November 18, 1996, ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1996/11/19/woman-ordained-lutheran-bishop-reportedly-first-woman-bishop-in-asia&post_id=8493; see also Nikhila Henry, “India Gets First Woman Anglican Bishop from Andhra,” *Times of India*, September 28, 2013, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/india-gets-first-woman-anglican-bishop-from-andhra/articleshow/23176743.cms.

²² “Death of Asia’s First Woman Bishop.”

role model, established schools, orphanages, churches, and especially worked hard towards the empowerment of women and I am one among those women. She served the church in various capacities for 20 years.”

Bishop Katakshamma embodied a third-space of freedom and God-given identity through courageous actions transcending the limitations of her physical home and the traditional boundaries of her inherited church community and establishing another church among the vulnerable community. Her boldness represents a profound act of resistance and vision, one that is particularly significant within the Indian Lutheran context, where such leadership by women remains both rare and deeply impactful. Drawing from both her journey and my own pastoral experience, I contend that the church holds the potential to become a synodal third space—an open, relational, and transformative environment. To do so, the church must commit to dismantling entrenched dichotomies and double standards, and instead reconstitute herself through practices of solidarity, radical inclusion, and relational warmth. This vision invites the church not only to welcome diverse voices but also to be reshaped by them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how Dalit women celebrate a “synodal third space” like Mary at the wedding of Cana. Here, Mary’s prophetic agency that catalyzed Jesus’s first public act offers a powerful paradigm for reimagining the church as a synodal third space—one rooted not in hierarchy, but in relational discernment and inclusive action. Mary’s intervention established a liminal third space where divine purpose met human need, launching a ministry that operated outside of traditional ecclesiastical organizations. This theological moment is profoundly connected to the actual realities of women in ministry, especially in places like the Indian Lutheran Church, where the path to ordination and full ecclesial participation has been long and difficult. My own pastoral experience, alongside that of pioneers such as Bishop Katakshamma, demonstrates that women can and do establish third spaces of trust, healing, and transformation. When the church welcomes such places,

which are defined by solidarity, vulnerability, and shared leadership, it becomes more than just a place of worship, but also a living manifestation of God's inclusive and liberating presence in the world.

This chapter began by engaging with Pope Francis's understanding of synodality as an ecclesial discernment process that takes place in prayer, adoration, and dialogue with God's word. To this, my study adds that synodality also necessitates honouring others and engaging in dialogue with those around us, particularly women and the marginalized. From this perspective, the synodal third space emerges as a vital ecclesial and social reality, a space of mutual learning, discernment, and radical inclusion, where all voices are welcomed, especially those historically silenced. The plentiful conversion of water into wine in this first sign serves as a metaphor for the new creation, a third area where human frailty and divine mercy coexist. Thus, Mary's agency serves as an example of how women can be changing agents by exhibiting relational leadership that connects divine action with human need. Mary stands between the human need and divine possibility, much like many women in ministry who mediate between broken social structures and God's promise of wholeness. Her liminality makes her a prototype for third-space leadership.

Women have for long made substantial, often unacknowledged, contributions to the life and growth of the church. In particular, in India, Dalit women, through their acts of resilience and leadership, have created transformative third spaces within and beyond ecclesial structures. Leaders such as Bishop Katakshamma, who founded a new ecclesial space outside her original church community, and my own experience as one of the first women ordained in the South Andhra Lutheran Church, demonstrate the potential of women's leadership to foster healing, joy, and renewal, mirroring Mary's prophetic action at the wedding in Cana using the church as the third space.

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Part 2

Women Birthing a Synodal Church by Exercising Agency in the “Third Space”

4. The Feminist Genius of Asian Catholic Women Preaching: Reclaiming an Uncommon Priesthood

Sharon A. Bong

As I write this chapter for the Ecclesia of Women in Asia's eleventh biennial conference, I am transported to my younger days as a twenty-something angry, feminist, Catholic layperson, who aspired towards priesthood (or imagined I did). The anger, much dissipated having encountered the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) twenty years ago, was the consequence of realizing that priestly ordination was only reserved for biologically-determined men within the faith tradition. The male privilege that was accorded to boys and men outside the church (e.g., son preference in families) seemed to me not only paralleled within the church but also augmented, as one is taught that priestly ordination for men is divinely ordained and therefore incontestable. It would not be an exaggeration to say that EWA, over the span of ten biennial conferences, sustained my faith as witnessing women gathering, theologizing and in particular, breaking bread together, laughing, crying, singing, and dancing, manifests to me the full dignity of women as persons created *imago Dei*.

As a fifty-something, less angry, feminist, Catholic scholar in gender, sexuality, and religious studies today, I have moved on from that priestly ambition in the like manner that feminist theologians have moved on in reclaiming other ecclesiastical spaces to realise their abundant gifts. One of these online spaces is Catholic Women Preach (CWP), an innovative platform for diverse and theologically-trained Catholic women to preach to a global audience, addressing contemporary challenges based on biblical readings over the liturgical year.¹ Catholic women preaching constitutes an ecclesia of women and prides itself on delivering "better homilies" in

¹ Catholic Women Preach, "About," *Catholic Women Preach*, catholicwomenpreach.org/about.

response to Pope Francis’s “off-the-cuff remarks calling homilies at Catholic churches ‘a disaster.’”² CWP as a women-inspired, women-centered, and women-powered collaborative project “is a deeply faithful, hopeful, and joyful initiative intended to build up the Church,”³ with the following aims:

- to serve as an inspirational, theologically-based resource for ordained priests, deacons, catechists, and all involved in the ministry of the word in the Catholic Church,
- to encourage Catholics, especially younger adult Catholics, with messages of hope that renew faith, strengthen us, and encourage active engagement in the life of the church for our work in the world,
- to provide a global platform for women’s voices and faith reflections so that the fullness of our Catholics giftedness can be accessed by all Catholics.

Catholic Women Preach embodies the conference theme, as it also constitutes an “ecclesia of women as synodal third space” which EWA defines as “synodality from below and from the perspective of the excluded . . . an in-between space for those who seem to fall into the cracks of mainstream or officially recognized spaces.”⁴ CWP’s mission—succinctly captured in its tagline, “raising voices, renewing the church”⁵—is apt as it is imbued with a critical gender lens. A gender lens firstly entails according

² Heidi Schlumpf, “Pope Francis Wants Better Homilies. Find Them at Catholic Women Preach,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 26, 2023, ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/pope-francis-wants-better-homilies-find-them-catholic-women-preach.

³ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

⁴ “EWA XI Call for Papers: Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space,” *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/.

⁵ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

epistemic privilege to women “traditionally omitted or misrepresented” in the church’s lectionary (e.g., Mary Magdalene) which, in turn, gives life to “the Scripture texts to deepen our understanding of God’s saving presence in the world.”⁶ A gender lens secondly entails a critique of structural inequalities and inequities from within and beyond the church that detract from experiencing “God’s saving presence in the world.”⁷ Deploying a critical gender lens by women preachers (e.g., through videos, transcripts of what is preached, Scripture readings referred to), potentially engenders a ground-up transformation of the church and, by extension, online and offline faith communities, beyond Catholic ones.

A faith community that walks the talk of synodality in turn, revitalises the church as “listening, dialogical, and service-oriented . . . [comprising] a non-hierarchical communion of a ‘discipleship of equals,’ marked by mutuality, relationality, and inclusivity.”⁸ This chapter aims to accord epistemic privilege to seven Asian theologians from EWA featured in Catholic Women Preach as women who inhabit an uncommon home as pilgrims, prophets, and priests. They are Antoinette Gutzler, Shalini Mulackal, Agnes Brazal, Kochurani Abraham, Kristine C. Meneses, Pauline Chakkalal, DSP, and Virginia Saldanha. I contend that they embody an uncommon priesthood as faithful religious and laywomen of the Catholic Church who are invested in opening up spaces of belonging for themselves and others. In doing so, they manifest what I term as a “feminist genius”—a counterpoint to the church’s construct of “feminine genius.”

The next section of the chapter expounds on this counterpoint and how it relates to synodality. The feminist framing of the interpretation of homilies by seven EWA women theologians thematically structures the chapter into the ways in which they radicalize feminist theology and praxis within a decolonial framework of Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space”⁹: “A

⁶ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

⁷ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

⁸ “EWA XI Call for Papers.”

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2004).

birthing mission” that recognizes women as co-creators; “A priestly mission” that honors women’s call to leadership in the church; and “A prophetic mission” that foregrounds women’s vision and praxis for interconnectedness, social justice, and inclusivity. The analysis has wider implications for the relevance of Catholic social teaching through the litmus test of women’s lived realities and the synodal call for greater discipleship in a deeply hierarchical church and fractured world today.

What Has a “Feminist Genius” Got to Do With It?

I first came across the term “feminine genius” (in my twenty-something angry feminist phase) when I was preparing for the NGO Forum that was held in conjunction with the 1995 Fourth (and final) United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, aimed at advancing the rights of women. In his *Letter to Women* written for this august occasion, Saint John Paul II begins by conveying cordial greetings to women of the world—“*women who are mothers,*” “*women who are wives,*” “*women who are daughters,*” “*women who work,*” “*consecrated women,*” and “*every woman*”¹⁰—for their selfless service and dedication of gifts to their families, faith communities, society at large, and the poor. He reiterates that the “highest expression of the ‘feminine genius’” is embodied in Mary and exhorts women to emulate her piety and obedience as the quintessential “handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38).¹¹ He (self)references *Mulieris Dignitatem* to remind all women of their place—in relation to men—given the unchanging “complementarity of male and female roles” that draws on the gendered dualism of “the ‘Marian’ principle [which is subordinate to] . . . the Apostolic-Petrine principle.”¹² When one delves into *Mulieris Dignitatem* that specifically addresses “the dignity and vocation of women,” we find a startling vilification of “women’s rights”

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, June 29, 1995, no. 2, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 10.

¹² John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 11. See also John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988).

because, from the standpoint of the church, they potentially unsettle the hallowed principle of gender complementarity. In defense of “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’*” that is to say, that dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (no. 10), he stresses that: “Consequently, even the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words ‘He shall rule over you’ (Genesis 3:16) must not under any condition lead to the ‘masculinization’ of women. In the name of liberation from male ‘domination,’ women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine ‘originality’” (no. 10).

The qualifier “feminine” in “feminine genius” thus essentializes womanhood for women with assigned and fixed (as God-ordained) attributes such as selflessness and subordination not only to God but also men. Women’s rights (as secularized) that can potentially lead to the “‘masculinization’ of women”—which finds expression in standing up and speaking out, especially in abusive situations both within and without the church—is deemed as problematic. There is, as such, a need to call into question the church’s insistence on “feminine genius” through the decades, which seemingly valorizes women’s “feminine ‘originality’” but in truth, negates their personhood. Gender complementarity that arguably rests on a continuum with sexism is similarly apparent in Pope Francis’s *Amoris Laetitia* that celebrates love in the family, where he says:

I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities—motherhood in particular—also grant duties because womanhood also entails a specific mission in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all. (no. 173)

Contrary to the Pope’s position, feminisms (rather than in the singular) that “demand uniformity” (i.e., women as equal as men) are valued as they expose the gendered dualisms (e.g., the lesser valued second terms in

male/female, mind/body, rationality/irrationality, subject/handmaid) that undergird “the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10). The “value [of] feminism[s]” to most self-identifying feminists (which is not a homogenous group), certainly lies in upholding “the grandeur of women” as well as their ordinariness; their (in light of diverse genders, sexes, and sexualities) “inalienable human dignity” as well as their inalienable women’s rights as human rights; their so-called “feminine abilities” which flow from the uniqueness of “motherhood” but are not reducible to it; and their so-called “masculine” abilities (if one were to fall back on the use of narrower sex/gender categories) to not be silent, to speak up and stand up for themselves and others.

It is from this standpoint of resistance as a means to engendering gender justice and inclusivity that inspired me to coin the term *feminist genius*. A “feminist genius” is, as I have argued more fully elsewhere, a “counterpoint to the equal-but-not-quite standpoint of ‘feminine genius,’ as it unequivocally deems their personhood as *imago Dei*; different but equal.”¹³ A “feminist genius,” that other F-word, makes visible the false choice between either being a mother or becoming a feminist. It demystifies essentialist terms that ontologically subjugate women in the name of piety, such as “feminine ‘originality,’” “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’*” and reclaims the personhood of women vis-a-vis the “‘masculinization’ of women [in] the name of liberation from male ‘domination’” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10), which includes clericalism.

A “feminist genius” thus draws from “gender ideology,” which continues to be cancelled out by Pope Francis, who describes it as “the ugliest danger of our time.”¹⁴ Women who preach draw from the wellspring of feminisms as “gender ideology” that seeks to affirm women’s

¹³ Sharon A. Bong, “Women Opening Up Spaces of Belonging for Women in the Church,” *Concilium* 5 (2022): 71.

¹⁴ Lisa Zengarini, “Pope Francis: Gender Ideology is The Ugliest Danger of Our Time,” *Vatican News*, March 1, 2024, [vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-03/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-the-ugliest-danger-of-our-time.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-03/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-the-ugliest-danger-of-our-time.html).

inherent dignity, her manifold gifts, and fundamental rights to fully realize her personhood and to live an abundant life. It inadvertently challenges the church's resolute "no" on (the "non-issue" of) women's ordination to priesthood and female diaconate despite the clarion and protracted call to synodality.¹⁵

The Ecclesia of Women of Asia within an ecclesia of women—Catholic Women Preach—is not unlike an Occupy movement¹⁶ that stakes their claim as *imago Dei* and works at celebrating diversity, inclusivity, and justice for all. In planetary solidarity, in the Age of the Anthropocene and COVID-19, this transnational and transformative agency of Asian Catholic women preaching heralds the good news founded on women's pilgrimage (in going beyond closed doors to open corridors of cyberspace), prophetic vision, and priestly vocation that liberates theology.¹⁷ The following homilies showcase the theology and praxis of a "feminist genius" for an uncommon priesthood.

A Birthing Mission

The Feast of the Assumption invites us then, to birth a new vision like the apocalyptic woman and like Mary, by becoming persons, a community, a church who can intervene prophetically in this world. This new vision that we call the Reign of God would be realized where people share, where they love the earth and all its creatures, where they take a stance to include the excluded ones of this world into the table fellowship of life. For this to happen, we need to be impregnated by the Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God, who would make us friends of God and the prophets. Then, we will give birth to God as Mary did and share in her assumption in the "already-

¹⁵ Loup Besmond de Senneville, "Pope Francis Rules Out Female Diaconate," *La Croix International*, May 21, 2024, international.la-croix.com/religion/pope-francis-rules-out-female-diaconate.

¹⁶ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-Lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

¹⁷ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster, *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Fortress Press, 2017).

not yet” dialectic, till we merge fully with the source of life. Are we ready for this birthing mission?¹⁸

Kochurani Abraham, former coordinator of EWA, is a self-identified feminist theologian, gender researcher, and trainer from Kerala, India, as well as a social activist, academician, and spiritual seeker. The excerpt of her sermon on the Feast of the Assumption is pregnant with meaning. The ambivalence of the “‘already-not yet’ dialectic” affords a “Third Space” between, on the one hand, the veneration of Mary not only as “handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38)¹⁹ but also “the source of life” in “[giving] birth to God” and, on the other, the vilification of women whose “bodies,” as she says elsewhere in her sermon, “are still seen through the lens of purity–pollution set by religious patriarchy.” She alludes to, among other gender-based discriminations and violence, the prohibition of women at her home parish, the Syro-Malabar Church, from entering “the *Madbaha* or the ‘holy of holies,’” a practice that she finds “exceedingly offensive.”²⁰ As the eminent postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha opines:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past.²¹

The “Third Space of enunciation” according to Bhabha, straddles the temporal-spatial shifts in cultural meanings between the colonizer’s imposition of a “sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past” and

¹⁸ Kochurani Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary,” *Catholic Women Preach*, August 15, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/08152018.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 10.

²⁰ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

²¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

the (former) colonized people's refusal to be immobilized in such an "homogenizing (in imitation of the colonizer's culture and) . . . originary Past." This refusal precipitates "an ambivalent process," and necessitates a decolonizing process which "destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code."²² A "Third Space" is therefore imbued with subversive potential to deconstruct and reconstruct cultural meanings. "It is only after entering more deeply into feminist theology," adds Abraham, "that I found the imagery of the embodied Mary in heaven subversively fascinating, as it offers scope for challenging the gender politics of Christianity as a religion."²³

Abraham's vision sees woman, becoming this "integrated, open, expanding code":²⁴ as Mary, "the source of life,"²⁵ who shares with all women (with a womb) leaky bodies that have been culturally maligned and repudiated as unclean. Woman also signifies "the apocalyptic woman,"²⁶ who "invites us then, to birth a new vision" where women become persons, and faith communities and the church repent to "intervene prophetically in this world," recognising that we as humans are not just interconnected but are one with the "earth and all its creatures."²⁷ This implies embracing the personhood of "earth and all its creatures" as legal entities.²⁸ This "new vision" radically births "the table fellowship of life" that celebrates diversity, (social, gender, environmental) justice, and inclusivity, as it "include[s] the excluded ones of this world," beginning with women with all her (dis)abilities and (dis)figurations. Woman finally, signifies "the

²² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

²³ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

²⁵ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁶ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁷ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁸ Viktoria Kahui, "Granting Legal 'Personhood' To Nature is a Growing Movement—Can It Stem Biodiversity Loss?" *The Conversation*, April 25, 2024, theconversation.com/granting-legal-personhood-to-nature-is-a-growing-movement-can-it-stem-biodiversity-loss-227336.

Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God” that permeates all of creation.²⁹ The created becomes a creator.

Reclaiming the “lost . . . values of compassion (*karuna*) and love” that is the seed of birthing a “new vision” is exhorted by Pauline Chakkalal of the Daughters of St. Paul, a distinguished theologian from India who is actively engaged in women’s empowerment programmes and interreligious and ecumenical ministries. The ontological proximity of women in birthing a “new vision” and a new world lies in the etymology of compassion which, as Chakkalal notes, draws on the “Hebrew word for compassion *rahamim* [that] expresses the feminine aspect of God.”³⁰ The recuperation of the womb as the seat of compassion inverts the age-old historicisation of the womb as the locus of hysteria, “the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*, which derives in turn from the Sanskrit word for stomach or belly.”³¹ The sacralization of the womb as expressing “the feminine aspect of God” is a noteworthy counterpoint firstly to the pathologization of the womb, as a “free floating organism . . . [which] gave rise to a battery of bizarre physical and mental symptoms.”³² Secondly, it subverts the demonization of the womb, as hysterical convulsions were once viewed as “*stigmata diaboli*” or marks of the devil.³³ Medicalization of the womb was then “replaced by supernatural invocations . . . [that resulted in] official manuals for the detection of witches, often virulently misogynistic, supplied instructions for the detection, torture, and, at times, execution of the witch/hysteric.”³⁴ Bearers of a womb (which includes but is not limited to women, e.g., trans men) historically, medically, physiologically, and theologically misunderstood, maligned, and murdered are now sacralized,

²⁹ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

³⁰ Pauline Chakkalal, “Second Sunday of Easter,” *Catholic Women Preach*, April 8, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/04082018.

³¹ Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 19, doi.org/10.1515/9780691194486.

³² Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 19.

³³ Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 20.

³⁴ Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 20–21.

become an “integrated, open, expanding code,”³⁵ as hysterical co-creators in radically engendering a “new vision” and new world for all.

A “new vision” and new world in turn become a “Third Space” of creation that bearers of wombs have come to occupy that is imbued with subversive potential to deconstruct and reconstruct not just cultural but also historical, medical, physiological, and theological meanings. A feminist and decolonial reading of the “bent woman,” there and then, offered by Chakkalalal, extends the spatial-temporal relevance of the “Third Space” for all women, men and nonbinary persons, here and now. Chakkalalal celebrates the “bent woman” in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 13:10–17) “as a paradigm for women’s liberation from all forms of bondage.”³⁶ She adds that:

In the first part of the story, set in the context of Jesus’s synagogue teaching, his compassionate gesture towards the bent woman brings her from the periphery to the center. Upon seeing her, Jesus calls her over and says, “Woman you are set free from your ailment” (v. 12). Instantly the crippled woman stands up straight and glorifies God. This nameless woman’s eighteen years of suffering have become symbolic of the suffering of women down the ages under patriarchy and its sexist ideologies and practices.³⁷

According epistemic privilege to the “bent woman,” as Chakkalalal does, transports her “from the periphery to the center,” as her narrative “has largely been ignored in the scholarly literature.”³⁸ So “getting the story of the bent woman straight”³⁹ not only foregrounds but also centers her narrative by carving out a discursive space, a “Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent

³⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

³⁶ Chakkalalal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

³⁷ Chakkalalal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

³⁸ Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 83.

³⁹ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 83.

process.”⁴⁰ The ambivalence of meaning attributed to the “bent woman” encapsulates the shift from a “physiognomic misogyny”⁴¹ to her physiological and spiritual healing by Jesus. It was typical of the Greco-Roman world that linked “physical features with inner moral characteristics”⁴²—a moral lack, a feminized “*spirit* of weakness even evil disposition”⁴³—that are consonant with her crookedness. The significance of Jesus’s announcement, “Woman you are set free from your ailment” is manifold: physiological (she “stands up straight”), spiritual (she “glorifies God”), and enunciatory. The “Third Space of enunciation”⁴⁴ afforded by Chakkalal’s feminist-decolonial reading of the “bent woman” undermines invisibility (in “scholarly literature”), misrepresentation through “physiognomic misogyny,” and in so doing, liberates her and by extension, those who identify with her, in *our* varied forms of disabilities, depravities, and diseases, “from all forms of bondage.” In liberating the “bent woman” who is “nameless,”⁴⁵ thereby signifying the least, the last and the lost, we hold ourselves accountable to the ways in which we relegate the “disabled,” “depraved,” and “diseased” other to “the periphery.” In liberating ourselves from the bondage of gender and racial inequities that relegate the other to the margins, we manifest *feminist genius*; we extend the “ambivalent process”⁴⁶ in seeing a “new vision”⁴⁷ and partaking in the birthing of a new world.

A Priestly Mission

Abraham’s “‘already-not yet’ dialectic”⁴⁸ finds expression in the contested signification of woman as a category, at once elevated and valued

⁴⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴¹ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 85.

⁴² Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 85.

⁴³ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 86.

⁴⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴⁵ Chakkalal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

⁴⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴⁷ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁴⁸ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

differently within the “gender politics of Christianity as a religion.” Her sermonising under the auspices of CWP affords a “Third Space” that “though unrepresentable in itself . . . constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”⁴⁹ The church fathers of course maintain the “primordial unity or fixity,” the complementarity of sex/gender in “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’* that is to say, that dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10). In contrast, women’s ministry in the church manifests “signs [that] can [and should] be . . . rehistoricized and read anew.”⁵⁰ CWP in the here-and-now affords “the discursive conditions of enunciation” that enable us to envision the “already-not yet” dialectic in the there-and-then. To illustrate this, we now turn to Virginia Saldanha, who preaches on Holy Thursday in 2020, the first year of COVID-19. Saldanha served as the first Executive Secretary of the Women’s Desk in the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (1996–2010), has held leadership positions in the coordinating team of EWA, and tirelessly advocates for women survivors of sex abuse in the church in India, as well as the recognition of the rights and dignity of LGBTI+ persons. On responding to God’s call to ordained ministry, she says:

Many of us women feel strongly our exclusion from responding to the stirring within us to answer God’s call to serve people through ordained ministry. Jesus did not institute a priesthood, he did not give names to ministries within the community. The Pauline churches seem to have been charismatic communities operating under Paul, without any clear structured organization. Ministry belonged to all, for each member had a charism (Romans 12:4–8). Jesus only asked his followers to do what he had done. Jesus handed his disciples a challenging servanthood. It

⁴⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

⁵⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

involves humility in service and sacrifice even to the extent of breaking one's body and shedding one's blood. Holy Thursday places before us the challenges involved in following Jesus' model of service among the People of God.⁵¹

The church's official theology, largely promulgated through male theologians, would likely classify women's call to a priestly vocation—that “stirring within [them] to answer God's call to serve people through ordained ministry”—as “*sensus fidei fidelis*” which is feminized (thus trivialized) as a “natural, immediate, and spontaneous reaction.”⁵² A “*sensus fidei fidelis*” contrasts with “theology” or “*scientia fidei*,” which is masculinized as “reflective knowledge of the mysteries of faith which deploys concepts and uses rational procedures to reach its conclusions.”⁵³ Though it is acknowledged that “*sensus fidei fidelis* flows from the theological virtue of faith . . . [which is] prompted by love, to adhere without reserve to the whole truth revealed by God,”⁵⁴ women's deep “stirring . . . to . . . ordained ministry” is negated as out of sync with the “whole truth revealed by God. Besides, ‘ministerial priesthood’ that is reserved only for (biological) men, as systematically rationalized in the doctrines of the church, draws on gendered dualisms of Christ as the “*Bridegroom*” and the gift of the church as its bride, invested with a “royal priesthood.”⁵⁵

The application of the “Third Space of enunciation”⁵⁶ in this instance lies in women's indefatigable insistence on working the hyphen, the space in-between a “*sensus fidei fidelis*” and “*scientia fidei*.” Saldanha references

⁵¹ Virginia Saldanha, “Holy Thursday,” *Catholic Women Preach*, April 9, 2020, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/04092020.

⁵² International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” June 10, 2014, no. 54, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

⁵³ International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei*,” no. 54.

⁵⁴ International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei*,” no. 56.

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

⁵⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

early Christianity, the “charismatic communities” of the “Pauline churches” that embraced Jesus’s rebranding of leadership as “servanthood . . . [that] involves humility in service and sacrifice even to the extent of breaking one’s body and shedding one’s blood.”⁵⁷ We are reminded of women’s experiential proximity to “shedding [their] blood” in birthing missions as discussed in the previous section. Women’s insistence is also reflected in their inhabiting the space in-between exclusion-inclusion, not fully excluded as invested with a “royal priesthood” yet not fully included as divested from a “ministerial priesthood.”⁵⁸ This space in-between, not romanticised as the anguish of “exclusion from responding to the stirring within us to answer God’s call to serve people through ordained ministry,”⁵⁹ is intergenerationally borne.

Why, then, do women of faith choose this anguished path (of standing and knocking on a closed door) through the ages, even now when contrary to the spirit of synodality, the door is yet again closed to reinstituting the female diaconate?⁶⁰ On responding to God’s call to serve people, Saldanha adds that:

Women are living this model of priesthood and are being true to their baptismal anointing as “priest, prophet and leader.” In various milieus, where you may not find a sacramentally ordained priest, many women around the world are living the priesthood of Jesus in servant leadership, being the presence of Jesus to people. The women in Amazonia are doing this! Sisters in India live and work among the indigenous and poor people of India, and in fact two sisters lost their lives standing for the rights of their people. Women show the least and the last the loving and

⁵⁷ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

⁵⁹ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶⁰ See Besmond de Senneville, “Pope Francis Rules Out Female Diaconate”; Susan Rakoczy, “The Ordination of Catholic Women as Deacons: The State of the Question,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1–10, doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5965; and Phyllis Zagano, “Women Deacons and Service at the Altar,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 590–609, doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784766.

compassionate face of God. Women live their priesthood where they are planted and demonstrate to the sacramentally ordained ministers what the priesthood of Jesus truly means.⁶¹

The hyphenated category of “servant leadership” (seemingly a contradiction in terms) as lived out by women globally “where they are planted” reflects to the least, the last, and the lost, “the loving and compassionate face of God.” In doing so, they “create a non-clerical and non-hierarchical Church . . . [in the like manner of the early Christians, and we] only need courage to think local and impact the global Church.”⁶² Women “[living] their priesthood where they are planted” manifest What Bhabha terms as “the productive capacities of this Third Space”:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you—may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end, we should remember that it is the “inter”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the “people.” And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.⁶³

Women’s courage and steadfastness in inhabiting “that alien territory” of not closing the door, to “stirring[s]” deep within their hearts, transforms this hostile space to a “productive” one in fashioning new visions and praxis. Although Bhabha theorizes within the milieu of “colonial or

⁶¹ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶² Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

postcolonial provenance,” one could soundly apply this to the context of the clerical and hierarchical church. Women’s refusal to self-silence the promptings of their hearts, women who like Saldanha unashamedly speak out about it, women who stubbornly remain out of place (not unlike anti-colonialists) bear the mark of the “split-space of enunciation,” “the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”⁶⁴ CWP thus becomes that “in-between space” for “cutting edge” theologizing that recuperates and proliferates the category ‘woman’ as more than a tag-on to the male subject and in doing so, liberates theology and decolonises the clericalism and hierarchy of the church.⁶⁵

A Prophetic Mission

A “feminist genius” manifests so far, in the above sections, “a birthing mission” and “a priestly mission,” which contests the gendered dualisms of the church that feed the complementarity of sex/gender. Self-identified feminists such as Abraham, Chakkalakal, and Saldanha do this by inhabiting the “in-between space”⁶⁶ of being an outsider-insider within their faith communities. Participating in God’s redemptive plan for humanity requires a rethinking of not only the church’s theology of the body but also its ecotheology that is anthropomorphic and androcentric which centres the human and man in creation.⁶⁷ Abraham speaks of a “new vision that we call the Reign of God [that] would be realized where people share, where they love the earth and all its creatures, where they take a stance to include the excluded ones of this world into the table fellowship of life.”⁶⁸ She goes on to assert, “For this to happen, we need to be

⁶⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁶⁵ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁶⁷ Sharon A. Bong, “Not Only for the Sake of Man: Asian Feminist Theological Response to *Laudato Si’*,” in *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (Fortress Press, 2017), 81–96, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt42b.

⁶⁸ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

impregnated by the Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God.”⁶⁹ Agnes M. Brazal, a full professor and eminent feminist-postcolonial theologian with De La Salle University in the Philippines as well as a founding “mother” of EWA, speaks of “Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship”:

Jesus clarified to Pilate that his “kingdom does not belong in this world” (John 18:36). The reign of God for Jesus is not the restoration of the Kingdom of David which is what many Jews were hoping for. While not directly political and military, nevertheless Jesus’ notion of God’s reign has strong political implications. In Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship, his rejection of rituals and beliefs that unnecessarily burden the poor and the excluded, and his destabilizing parables that bring down the mighty or honourable from their thrones, Jesus gave us a glimpse of what it is like in God’s reign. This vision posed a big threat to the guardians of the Jewish tradition as well as to the Roman authorities.⁷⁰

Ultimately, “the productive capacities of this Third Space”⁷¹ lie in our inhabiting the earth, and charged as faithful disciples of Christ, subverting social orders that are unjust, exclusionary, and oppressive. The “already-not yet dialectic” that Abraham envisions⁷² is echoed when Brazal alludes to “a glimpse of what it is like in God’s reign.”⁷³ Systemic discrimination and violence will be dismantled, for instance, the “rejection of rituals and beliefs that unnecessarily burden the poor and the excluded, and [Jesus’s] destabilizing parables that bring down the mighty or honourable from their thrones.”⁷⁴ Abraham adds, in celebration of diversity that, “In this new social order, whoever is devalued for their color, gender, sexual

⁶⁹ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷⁰ Agnes M. Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King,” *Catholic Women Preach*, November 25, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/11252018.

⁷¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁷² Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷³ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

⁷⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

orientation, social status and the like, regain their dignity and personhood.”⁷⁵

The “productive capacities of this Third Space”⁷⁶ also find expression in what Antoinette Gutzler terms as “liminal spaces.”⁷⁷ Gutzler, former consultant to EWA, is a Maryknoll Sister from Queens, New York, and has served in mission both in Tanzania and East Africa and taught at Fu Jen University in Taipei. She says:

We, then, need to hear—and we need to listen. And so, the question: do I/you/we hear and listen to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized calling our names from the liminal spaces where they struggle for life and understanding? There is no running away from the indifference that Pope Francis calls the scourge of our times—the evils of racism, gun violence, wars, xenophobia, destruction from climate change and the powerlessness felt by so many that they “don’t matter.”⁷⁸

When we deem the polyphony of “voices of the oppressed and marginalized” that call out to us, as voices that matter and resist the “sin” of “indifference,” we engender “liminal spaces”—a heaven on earth. In doing so, we begin to bear the mark of what Bhabha terms as the “split-space of enunciation,” where, in constant reflexivity and humility, we ask the question: “do I/you/we hear and listen to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized?”⁷⁹ The inter-relationality of “I/you/we” bears the mark of interconnectedness and inclusivity that we lose sight of when we are complicit in the “powerlessness felt by so many that they ‘don’t matter.’”⁸⁰ Whilst the “the evils of racism, gun violence, wars, xenophobia,

⁷⁵ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁷⁷ Antoinette Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene,” *Catholic Women Preach*, July 22, 2023, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/07222023.

⁷⁸ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁷⁹ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸⁰ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

destruction from climate change”⁸¹ are monumental scourges of humanity today that are likely to exacerbate in our increasingly divisive world of global politics, a feminist genius praxis stands in faithful solidarity with the “powerlessness felt by so many.”⁸² A feminist praxis that explores the “in-between space,”⁸³ that carries the hope of the future in the present from lessons in the past, evinces “Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship”⁸⁴ that is premised on respect and celebration of equity, social justice, and inclusivity for all and at all times and spaces.

Bringing to fruition such an out-of-the-world-yet-imaginable vision entails a “reversal of values,” as Shalini Mulackal, former professor of systematic theology at Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi, posits. The lowly birth of a king, born of a woman, and witnessed by humble shepherds, heralds a “new world order,” as Mulackal adds:

Jesus’ birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God’s design for the redemption of all peoples. In this world, God’s Word is heard by the humble. There is place even for the shepherds. There is hope for the oppressed. God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created. The story of Christmas is both an announcement of hope and a call to humility.⁸⁵

As we continue God’s salvific plan, in a world that is fraught by divisiveness, strife, and violence, the temporal-spatial liminality that we find ourselves inhabiting, rests on “hope for the oppressed,” and the conviction that “God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created.”⁸⁶ This liminal space is akin to an “alien

⁸¹ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸² Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁸⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

⁸⁵ Shalini Mulackal, “Christmas,” *Catholic Women Preach*, December 25, 2017, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/12252017.

⁸⁶ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

territory”⁸⁷ where the fragility of hope and precarity of resolve serve as our way of answering and fulfilling (or at least, attempting to fulfil) “God’s design for the redemption of all peoples.”⁸⁸ The “productive capacities of this Third Space”⁸⁹ are evident when “God’s Word is heard by the humble” (redemption is within reach of the least, the last and the lost) and where there” is place even for the shepherds (a ‘despised occupation’ then)⁹⁰ that is analogous to the “disabled,” “depraved,” and “diseased” today.

These feminist visions render one of the questions for discernment in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the realization of a “synodal church” as somewhat hypocritical: “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?”⁹¹ The answers are apparent, but the church continues to not listen and disregards the intergenerational wisdom and gifts of women as pilgrims, priests, and prophets. Kristine C. Meneses, who is a Deaf and Disability advocate and associate professor with the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines, exhorts us to “‘be open,’ *ephpaphtha*,” in according epistemic privilege to the Deaf as knowers so that we, with our differentiated (dis)abilities, may come to learn that “deafness [is] not a deformity or defect, but a way of life and see the Deaf not as an object to cure or repair, but someone diverse.”⁹²

Conclusion

“The best way to conclude our reflections,” opines Pauline Chakkalal of the Daughters of St. Paul, “is to recall the words of Jesus, ‘Woman you are set free’ (Luke 10:12).”⁹³ A “feminist genius” thus fights the good fight against clericalism and hierarchy which includes the Pope’s cancel culture

⁸⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁸⁸ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

⁸⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁹⁰ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

⁹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum Laboris*, 41.

⁹² Kristine C. Meneses, “Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *Catholic Women Preach*, September 9, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/09092018.

⁹³ Chakkalal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

and denunciation of “gender ideology.” A “feminist genius” finishes the race by not taking no at face value (on the question of women’s leadership in church) and staying the course of valuing her gifts as pilgrim, priest, and prophet to any who care to listen and learn. A “feminist genius” keeps the faith rather than disavows the church, much to the chagrin of those who see in her an annoyance and threat. *Catholic Women Preach* is a safe space for the Ecclesia of Women in Asia within an ecclesia of women. It offers them a “Third Space” to realize God’s “kingdom [that] does not belong in this world (John 18:36).”⁹⁴ This is the empowering theology and praxis of a “feminist genius” for an uncommon priesthood.

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⁹⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

5. Women as an Engine of Synodality in the Catholic Church in India: A Critical Feminist Theological Perspective

Metti Amirtham

The Catholic Church, historically characterised by a rigid hierarchy, is undergoing a significant transformation spurred by Pope Francis’s call for synodality—“come let us journey together.”¹ This departure from traditional practices emphasises inclusivity, equality, and active participation among all members, challenging the entrenched decision-making power held by clergy and bishops. Pope Francis envisions a church where voices from various demographics harmoniously resonate, promoting decentralisation of power and a collaborative approach. The urgency and significance of this call underscore the necessity of embracing synodality as a fundamental shift in the church’s way of life.

Sr. Nathalie Becquart, the undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, characterizes women as the “engine of synodality.” This injects a compelling dimension into this transformative narrative. It challenges the historical male-centric power structure of the church, introducing the idea that women possess a unique agency in propelling the synodal journey. Sr. Becquart’s perspective sparks curiosity and prompts an exploration of how women’s active participation can be a catalyst for the envisioned synodal church. It serves as a beacon, guiding the chapter towards understanding women’s specific role and impact within this evolving ecclesiastical landscape.

This chapter aims to illuminate the intricacies of Pope Francis’s call for synodality, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of women in realizing

¹ Cf. Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission (Synod 2021–2023 Preparatory Document)*, 2, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf.

this transformative vision within the Catholic Church in India.² The objectives encompass an in-depth exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by women in becoming agents of synodality, providing insights into their contributions, voices, and experiences within the church. By employing a critical feminist theological perspective, this chapter seeks to bridge the gap between the aspirational ideals of synodality and the gendered realities, providing a nuanced understanding of women's roles in the church's journey towards a more inclusive and egalitarian future.³ Furthermore, this chapter proposes multifaceted approaches to promoting women's participation and leadership in the Catholic Church in India, aiming to demonstrate how fostering inclusivity and gender equality can empower women to make meaningful contributions to synodality and the church's life.

Synodality in the Catholic Church: Its Relevance

Synodality, a significant concept in the Catholic Church, involves a participatory and collaborative decision-making approach rooted in the Greek word *synodos*, meaning assembly. It emphasises the active involvement of the entire community, including bishops, clergy, and laity, fostering shared responsibility and acknowledging the Holy Spirit's work through diverse voices. It prioritizes dialogue, listening, and mutual respect, aiming to discern God's will and address contemporary challenges. By embracing synodality, the Catholic Church seeks to foster inclusivity, transparency, and accountability by engaging diverse members of the church in decision-making, thereby cultivating a more vibrant and dynamic church with a collective sense of ownership and a shared mission among the faithful.

² I do not mean "women" as a uniform category; rather, diversity is a defining feature, given the intersecting factors of class and caste that shape gender in the Indian context.

³ A feminist critical theological perspective critiques how women have been represented theologically in the church, often through a male lens. It exposes how such representations reinforce gender stereotypes and marginalize women's voices.

In recent years, the Catholic Church has placed a growing emphasis on synodality, a concept championed by Pope Francis to enhance participation, communion, and mission within the church. Various synodal gatherings and consultations at different levels, including dioceses and the universal church, have been held to address crucial issues and chart the way forward. The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, convened by Pope Francis, took place from October 4–28, 2023, and involved 365 synod members who deliberated on communion, participation, and mission. The participants approved a text advocating for greater “co-responsibility” among believers in the church’s mission and proposed concrete reforms to achieve it. This marked the conclusion of the first assembly, followed by the second session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held October 2–27, 2024, in Rome. During this session, a final document was approved and later ratified by Pope Francis. The document emphasises the greater inclusion of laypersons and women in the life of the church.

Women’s Role in the Church: A Bird’s Eye View

Women have played significant roles in the Catholic Church throughout its history, with their contributions evolving and facing challenges. In the early Christian community, women held leadership positions and actively contributed to the growth and spread of the faith. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul from the New Testament mention women like Phoebe, a deaconess (Romans 16:1–2), and Junia, considered by some scholars to be an apostle (Romans 16:7). Prisca, along with her husband Aquila, played a significant role in instructing Apollos in the ways of the Lord (Acts 18:26). The accounts of women like Lydia, a prominent convert in Philippi who opened her home for Christian gatherings (Acts 16:14–15), and Mary, the mother of John Mark, who hosted a prayer meeting at her house (Acts 12:12), further underscore the diverse and vital contributions of women in the early church. Hence, a considerable number of women have actively participated in the initial phases of the church’s ministry.

As the church became more organised and institutionalised, women's roles began to change, though some have made outstanding contributions. To mention a few here, in the third century, Catherine of Alexandria,⁴ an esteemed spiritual leader, engaged in debates with fifty philosophers, facing condemnation and death on the wheel for her remarkable achievements. St. Clare of Assisi,⁵ a contemporary of St. Francis, founded the Order of Poor Ladies, known as the Poor Clares. This religious community, dedicated to a life of poverty, prayer, and service, has made a significant contribution to the spiritual landscape of the church's history. St. Teresa of Avila stands out as another influential woman who left an indelible mark on the life of the church.⁶ A mystic and writer, she made substantial contributions to Christian spirituality through her works, such as *The Interior Castle*. St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) made significant contributions to the Catholic Church, and her impact is still recognised today.⁷ Her contributions to the Catholic Church include her mystical writings, efforts towards papal unity, calls for church reform, spiritual guidance to church leaders, and her exemplary life of service and charity. Her legacy endures as an inspiration for those seeking a deeper relationship with God and a commitment to the principles of Christian living.

In addition to these prominent figures, numerous women, founders of religious orders, played decisive roles in missionary services after the seventeenth century. Consecrated women religious managed convents, hospitals, and schools, contributing not only to the spiritual growth of their communities but also to the overall mission of the church. Their

⁴ "Saint Catherine of Alexandria: A Beacon of Catholic Faith and Wisdom," *Spiritual Culture*, September 24, 2020, spiritualculture.org/saint-catherine-of-alexandria.

⁵ Rosemary Stets, "Francis and Clare: Where the Tradition Begins," *Franciscan Media*, December 8, 2023, franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-tradition-and-resources/francis-and-clare-where-the-tradition-begins.

⁶ "St. Teresa of Avila," *Britannica*, November 7, 2025, britannica.com/biography/Saint-Teresa-of-Avila.

⁷ Steve Weidenkope, "How St. Catherine Brought the Pope Back to Rome," *Catholic Answers*, April 29, 2014, catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/how-st-catherine-brought-the-pope-back-to-rome.

commitment to education, healthcare, pastoral and charitable works exemplified the broader impact of women in the history of Christianity.⁸ These women, through their devotion to prayer, exploration of theology, and active engagement in missionary activities, significantly contributed to the foundation and growth of the Catholic Church. Their legacies continue to inspire and influence the practice of faith, emphasising the vital role that women played in the development and dissemination of Christian spirituality and theology down the centuries.

With the rise of women's movements and feminism advocating for equality, there has been an increased demand for women's participation in the church, beyond the traditionally prescribed roles in areas such as education, healthcare, and charitable work. Women actively participate in various lay ministries, serving as catechists, pastoral workers, lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and members of parish councils. They contribute to the spiritual and pastoral needs of local churches and communities. Additionally, women play instrumental roles in Catholic education and formation, serving as teachers, professors, theologians, counsellors and spiritual directors, thereby contributing to the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth of the Catholic faithful. They are at the forefront of social initiatives within the Catholic Church, addressing issues such as poverty, social injustice, healthcare, and other concerns affecting the marginalized communities. More than ever, women are claiming their rightful place for active participation in the church as equal partners alongside men.

Challenges Encountered by Women in the Church

Despite the valuable contributions that Catholic women make around the globe, they encounter challenges within the hierarchical structure of the church. The following are some of the difficulties faced by women in the Catholic Church solely because of their gender.

⁸ Cf. Julma Neo, "The Role of Consecrated Women in the Church and in Society Today: A Reflection," *Vincentiana* 45, nos. 4–5 (2001).

- **Gender bias and stereotypes:** Within the Catholic Church, women frequently encounter gender discrimination and enduring stereotypes that reinforce their subordinate status. Disparities in treatment, insufficient acknowledgement of their valuable contributions, limited prospects for advancement, and a lack of respect from clergy collectively impede the full realisation of women's potential within the church.
- **Limited opportunities:** There are very limited opportunities available for women and a lack of formal theological education impedes their pursuit of higher positions and recognition as theological authorities, which perpetuate gender imbalances within the church. The painful part for women is that the men and women who enroll for theological education study the same content and get the same qualifications but are assigned to different positions in the church. Women often find themselves working under the leadership of their male counterparts.
- **Limited leadership roles:** Despite the qualifications and various lay positions available to them, Catholic women face limited opportunities for leadership within the church hierarchy. Decision-making roles, such as those held by clergy and at higher levels, including bishops and cardinals, remain exclusively reserved for men, hindering women's ability to shape church policies and practices.
- **Insufficient representation:** The under-representation of Catholic women extends to key decision-making bodies, such as the exclusively male College of Cardinals tasked with electing the Pope. This notable absence not only curtails diversity but also restricts the impact of women in shaping the church's trajectory and policies. The dearth of female voices in these pivotal roles raises questions about inclusivity

and equal participation within the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church.

- **Exclusion from ordained ministry:** Catholic women encounter a significant challenge in the church's prohibition of their ordination as priests. This exclusion, rooted in theological interpretations and tradition, restricts women from holding authoritative positions and participating fully in sacramental leadership.

Thus, these systemic challenges confronting women in the church demand a radical transformation of entrenched gendered power dynamics. In this context, the notion of synodality emerges as a revolutionary paradigm that has the potential to dismantle hierarchical structures and create authentic spaces for women's participation and leadership.

Exploring Synodality Through a Feminist Theological Lens

Feminist theological frameworks offer unique insights into synodality and collaborative decision-making within the church. These perspectives challenge the traditional patriarchal structures and provide a transformative approach to synodality by emphasizing inclusivity, empowerment, and acknowledging diverse voices.

Scholars like Elizabeth A. Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz contribute valuable perspectives on power, gender, and inclusivity within religious institutions. Their works delve into synodality, urging a re-evaluation of hierarchical power dynamics. In *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), Elizabeth A. Johnson emphasizes relationality and the recognition of the full humanity of all individuals within the church. Johnson advocates for inclusive decision-making processes that value diverse voices and experiences.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a leading feminist theologian, critiqued patriarchal hierarchies in the church and society. In *Sexism and God-Talk*

(1983), *Women-Church* (1985), *Gaia and God* (1992), and *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican* (2008), she challenged structures of domination and called for participatory, collaborative communities marked by equality, inclusivity, and shared authority.

Feminist theologians insist that synodality must center the voices of women and marginalized groups rather than remain within patriarchal structures. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza envisions a “discipleship of equals,” Ivone Gebara calls for integrating poor women’s voices through ecofeminism, and Mary E. Hunt emphasizes women’s lived experience as theological wisdom. More recently, Phyllis Zagano, Cristina Inogés Sanz, and Agnes Brazal have highlighted that genuine synodality requires inclusive participation, intercultural dialogue, and renewed recognition of women’s ministries.⁹ This necessitates dismantling patriarchal structures, challenging traditional notions of authority, and embracing a pluralistic understanding of knowledge and wisdom. The feminist perspective on synodality emphasises relationality and interconnectedness, recognising the interdependence of all church members and promoting collaborative relationships based on mutual respect and equality. Within this framework, feminist theology calls for a critical examination of existing power structures that perpetuate oppression. Synodality, when viewed through a feminist lens, becomes a transformative process that advocates for social justice and strives for the full inclusion and empowerment of all individuals within the church through shared decision-making and egalitarian governance.

⁹ Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (Crossroad, 1993); Mary E. Hunt, “Synodality and the Feminist Future of the Church,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 2 (2020): 147–152; Phyllis Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ* (Paulist Press, 2020); Cristina Inogés Sanz, “Women and Synodality: Toward a Church That Listens,” in *Voices of Women at the Synod: Faith, Justice, and Renewal*, ed. Donatella Acerbi (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 45–56; and Agnes M. Brazal, “Synodality and Women in the Asian Church,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator (Orbis Books, 2014), 213–225.

Synodality Through an Indian Feminist Theological Lens

Indian feminist theology emphasises solidarity with marginalized communities, shaping a synodal perspective focused on actively tackling social injustices and advocating for the rights of those on the margins. This approach challenges patriarchal norms within the church, aiming for a synodal process that dismantles structures that sustain gender inequality.

Indian feminist theology, as articulated by theologians such as Kochurani Abraham, Virginia Saldanha, and Astrid Lobo, acknowledges the diverse cultural, social, and religious landscape of India.¹⁰ Emphasising contextual realities, these theologians highlight the intersectionality of caste and gender within the church. In the context of synodality, their focus extends to addressing the unique challenges faced by Dalit Christian women and advocating for the church's support of the marginalized. Virginia Saldanha envisions an inclusive church, while Astrid Lobo underscores interfaith dialogue and inclusivity within synodality, reflecting India's religious diversity. These theologians specifically emphasize the need for a theology questioning patriarchal understandings and standing in solidarity with all women facing various forms of violence and discrimination.

Indian feminist perspectives view synodality as a transformative process to address women's challenges within the church, stressing the need to empower women at the grassroots level and encourage their leadership in decision-making processes, challenging the prevailing notion that women should remain at the periphery.¹¹ In a nutshell, the Indian feminist

¹⁰ Kochurani Abraham, "Gender Politics of Religion: A Feminist Theological Appraisal," *Indian Journal of Christian Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (2014): 39–56; Virginia Saldanha, "Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Gender and Reproductive Injustice and Their Impact on Women's Agency in India," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2024): 391–410, doi:10.55476/001c.124031; and Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Synod: Some Signs of Hope for Women," *Matters India*, November 2, 2023, mattersindia.com/2023/11/synod-some-signs-of-hope-for-women.

¹¹ Metti Amirtham, "Embracing the Wisdom of Women," *JIVAN* (2023): 19–20; "Chandrayaan-3: India's Giant Leap for Gender Equality," *The New Leader* 136, no. 18 (2023): 33; "From Tradition to Transformation: Empowering Women in Church Administration," *The New Leader* 136, no. 14 (2023): 33.

theology enriches the understanding of synodality by incorporating diverse experiences within the Indian Catholic Church, promoting a more inclusive, empowering, and culturally sensitive approach which emphasises addressing specific challenges faced by women, particularly at the intersection of gender and caste dynamics.

Women as Catalysts for Synodality in the Catholic Church in India

A significant shift toward inclusivity occurred with Pope Francis's initiation of the "Synod on Synodality," providing space for individuals of all ages and genders to participate actively in dialogue and decision-making processes. While formal recognition of women's contributions in synods still leaves much to be desired, the synod on synodality represents a noteworthy step in acknowledging and valuing women's unique perspectives.¹² Pope Francis, in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, emphasized the indispensable contributions of women in the church, asserting that their presence is a matter of justice, granting them the right to full integration and the use of their gifts for the greater good of the church. For instance, he writes,

Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. We can mention Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. But I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and

¹² The increased involvement of women in this synod gathering and the questions related to broadening women's participation in the church were evident in Pope Francis's decision to allow eighty-two women to participate in the Synod on Synodality. For the first time in history, fifty-four of them were granted voting rights. Cf. Catherine Hadro and Rachel Thomas, "Synod on Synodality: Role of Women in the Synodal Spotlight," *National Catholic Register*, October 2, 2023, [ncregister.com/news/synod-on-synodality-role-of-women](https://www.ncregister.com/news/synod-on-synodality-role-of-women).

transformed families and communities by the power of their witness.”
(no. 12)

In alignment with Pope Francis’s perspectives, the Catholic Church in India is giving increasing attention to women’s participation. This perspective is reflected in the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI), which notes: “The sessions emphasized the need for integrating women into the Church’s synodal processes to promote a more inclusive and participatory Church structure.”¹³ This demonstrates the growing recognition of women as catalysts for synodality, affirming their vital role in fostering communion, participation, and mission within the Indian Church. The National Women’s Conference in Jharsuguda, Odisha, further exemplified this commitment, bringing together 453 women leaders from 132 dioceses to discern ways to strengthen women’s active participation in the life of the church.¹⁴

Efforts are underway to address the historical under-representation of women and to strengthen their role as key contributors to synodality in the Indian Catholic Church. These initiatives include both formal institutional changes and grassroots movements led by women themselves. Several global networks of women working within the church have emerged as independent forces for change, operating outside traditional hierarchical structures. Organisations like Voices of Faith, the Indian Women Theologians Forum (IWTF), Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), and Women’s Ordination Worldwide advocate for greater recognition of women’s contributions to church life. These networks provide vital platforms where women can share their experiences, articulate their theological insights, and advocate for transformation without relying on

¹³ LiCas News, “Conference in India Highlights Church Synodality and Women Leadership,” *Vatican News*, September 24, 2024, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-09/india-national-womens-conference-church-synodality.html; Joseph Scaria Palakeel, “Journeying Together to Evangelize: A Look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis,” *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 1 (2020): 119.

¹⁴ LiCas News, “Conference in India.”

hierarchical approval. In the Indian context, such networks are particularly significant as they create synodal-like spaces where women's voices can be heard and their leadership can flourish, even when formal church structures may not fully accommodate their participation.

In several dioceses, women are increasingly moving beyond traditional or consultative roles, actively shaping discussions and contributing to decisions that influence the broader faith community.¹⁵ However, mere participation in preparatory sessions is not enough; the impact of women's voices depends on how their insights are incorporated, acted upon, and reflected in the outcomes of the synodal process. Recognizing women as influential participants not only demonstrates a commitment to gender inclusivity but also enhances the church's discernment process, fostering richer, more holistic, and contextually grounded decision-making that benefits the entire faith community.

At this juncture, it is equally important to recognize the distinct and vital contribution of women religious. Within the synodal journey, they have actively participated in a spirit of collaboration, engaging deeply with questions of faith and mission. This involvement has enabled them to share their wisdom and lived experience, enriching the dialogue and fostering a more dynamic exchange within the wider church community. Through the lens of synodality, women religious not only share their individual voices but also collectively shape the direction and vision of their religious life, creating a vibrant and inclusive space for mutual discernment and communal growth.

Synodality has also facilitated the gathering of religious leaders from diverse Congregations, providing a platform for reflection and the sharing of their unique gifts while also fostering an environment where open discussions about vulnerabilities can take place freely. A promising aspiration for the future is the potential enhancement of relationships

¹⁵ In the dioceses of Trichy, Tanjore, Salem, Dharmapuri, and Kottar in Tamil Nadu, women play an active and integral role in the preparations for the synodal process.

among the church's hierarchy, the clergy, and the religious, creating a more positive and collaborative dynamic.

As the National CRI President of India and a Synod participant representing the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Sr. Nirmalini says,

From my experience in India, the preparation for the Synod has been a spiritual process, paving the way for a new beginning. The dedication of the organising teams was commendable, with some members making long journeys into remote villages to strive for the deadline. The efforts by the teams of lay faithful, religious, and priests touched the hearts of those they met, and vice versa. The consultations were an eye-opener for many who were not accustomed to being invited to speak out openly and freely.¹⁶

During a webinar hosted by the World Women's Observatory September 13–14, 2023, participants from around the world, including women and women religious from India, shared their hopes and concerns ahead of the Synod on Synodality in Rome. Some of the women religious were engaged in advocacy efforts, pushing for increased recognition and participation of women in decision-making bodies, including synods. They work towards breaking down barriers and promoting a more inclusive church structure. It is important to note that the specific involvement of Catholic women in synodality in India varies across dioceses and communities. Yet, women face challenges and obstacles in promoting synodality.

In my address to the diocesan synodal gathering, I unequivocally advocated for synodality, emphasizing the imperative inclusion of women in leadership roles and decision-making within the church. While expressing my joy at being invited, heard, and involved as important signs

¹⁶ Maria Nirmalini, "Inclusion of Women in Synod is an 'Opportunity to Share from Our Sacred Spaces,'" *Vatican News*, November 3, 2023, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-11/sisters-project-synod-nirmalini-xvi-ordinary-general-assembly.html; cf. Xavier Lawrence, "Shared Responsibility as a Pathway to Synodality: A Canonical Study," *Vaiharai* 27, no. 1 (2022): 16–30.

of growth in the church, I also asserted the necessity of attentively listening to the voices of the lay faithful, diminishing clericalism, and integrating care for nature into every celebration and ritual.¹⁷

Obstacles and Resistance Faced by Women in Promoting Synodality in India

While Pope Francis has made considerable efforts to promote synodality within the Catholic Church, women in India encounter numerous obstacles in their advocacy for synodality. When discussing women in the Indian Catholic Church, it is crucial to acknowledge its diversity. This diversity extends beyond the presence of three *sui juris* churches, encompassing a wide range of linguistic and socio-cultural realities. The church in India is faced with three persistently challenging features, namely, clericalism, gender inequality, and the insidious presence of caste. Addressing these issues and similar challenges during the synodal process remains an ongoing challenge for the church in India. Some of the trials and resistances that women encounter in their efforts to promote synodality are presented here.

The Catholic Church's historical patriarchal traditions have entrenched decision-making and authoritative roles predominantly within men. These deeply rooted norms pose a substantial impediment for women seeking a more participatory role in the church's synodal processes. Overcoming this formidable barrier requires a transformative shift in the church's institutional dynamics to promote greater inclusivity and gender equity within the realm of synodality.

Some parts of the church resist synodality because of doctrinal conservatism. In these areas, religious texts and teachings are often interpreted in traditional ways that limit women's roles and prevent them from participating in synodal processes. This conservative approach

¹⁷ Metti Amirtham, "Empowering Catholic Women Towards Inclusiveness," presented at the Diocesan Synodal Gathering, Diocese of Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, September 22, 2023 (unpublished address).

creates a significant obstacle and necessitates careful, open discussions to bridge the gap between traditional interpretations and the evolving needs of synodal participation.

The challenges faced by Indian women within the church are deeply intertwined with the broader fabric of societal and cultural norms. For instance, Sr. Dorothy, CRI, President of Trichy Diocese, Tamilnadu, said, “The local church faces the challenge of a local culture that tends to restrict the spaces of action for women. The church needs to help us to open up spaces where women can be actively involved.”

Across various regions, deeply ingrained societal expectations and cultural practices play a key role in perpetuating the marginalisation of women, creating formidable barriers for them to penetrate traditionally male-dominated spaces within the church. For instance, prevailing gender stereotypes often dictate predefined roles for women, constraining their agency and influence within religious circles. Furthermore, societal expectations limit women’s opportunities to pursue leadership roles or actively engage in decision-making processes. These deeply rooted norms present a complex web of challenges that intersect with religious structures, making it a nuanced struggle for women seeking to contribute meaningfully to synodal initiatives within the Indian Church.

Despite women making substantial contributions to various facets of church life, their efforts are frequently overlooked or inadequately acknowledged. This dearth of formal recognition not only diminishes the value of women’s contributions but also serves as a deterrent for them to pursue leadership roles within synodal structures actively.

For example, women in India play crucial roles in grassroots community and church initiatives, namely, in organising Basic Christian Communities, Small Christian Communities, Legion of Mary, other sodalities, prayer groups, educational programmes, or pastoral care, yet their efforts are not officially acknowledged in the hierarchical structures of the church. This absence of formal acknowledgement creates a sense of undervaluation, hindering women’s enthusiasm for participating in synodal processes and assuming leadership responsibilities actively.

Recognising and celebrating the specific contributions of women at all levels of the church becomes crucial for fostering an environment that encourages their meaningful involvement in synodality.

In some instances, women face limitations in theological education and training, which creates a barrier to their effective engagement in theological discussions within the church. This challenge highlights the importance of empowering women to study theology and teach in theological institutions.

The reality in India reveals a significant disparity in women's participation in theological education. The theological domain remains predominantly controlled by male clergy, with more institutions lacking women on their staff than those that actively recruit them. The presence of women professors on permanent faculty remains very limited, and in most cases, women are engaged only as visiting or guest faculty members. Even when women are invited to teach, their contributions are often restricted to one or two subjects, a single-credit course, or an elective.

The vast majority of women, particularly women religious who undertake theological studies, return to their former apostolates or assume responsibilities within their congregations rather than pursuing academic theological careers. This pattern not only curtails the breadth of women's voices in theological formation but also diminishes the possibility of integrating women's perspectives into mainstream academic theology. Consequently, theological education in many institutions risks being shaped predominantly by male experiences and interpretations, depriving the church of the richness that women's scholarship and lived realities could contribute to its teaching and leadership.

Shaping Synodality: The Impact of Women's Participation

The exploration of women as engines of synodality delves into the transformative role they can play in shaping and enriching synodal processes within the church. The following discussion highlights the unique contributions and perspectives that women could bring to enhance the dynamics of synodality.

The inclusion of women in synodal discussions broadens the spectrum of perspectives within the church. Women, drawing from their varied life experiences and roles, contribute rich insights that illuminate contemporary challenges and opportunities. For example, a woman involved in community outreach may offer unique perspectives on social issues faced by the faithful, while a female theologian might bring nuanced theological understanding. This multifaceted input ensures comprehensive consideration of matters, ultimately enhancing the quality and depth of decision-making within the synodal framework.

Women often bring heightened pastoral sensitivity and holistic problem-solving approaches that could significantly impact the synodal landscape. Their experiences can lead to more inclusive and caring pastoral practices within the church. For instance, women in pastoral care might emphasize community-building initiatives, mental health support, or outreach programmes that foster deeper connection and understanding among the faithful. This pastoral sensitivity promotes a more compassionate and empathetic approach to addressing the diverse needs of the church community.

Women's contributions to community building can profoundly impact synodality within the church. Women who have led church community events, fostered dialogue, and promoted collaboration among diverse groups bring valuable skills that strengthen the synodal process. Their experience in building relationships within local congregations equips them to create atmospheres of unity and cooperation. By drawing on these experiences, women can support processes that emphasize shared values, mutual responsibility, and inclusive participation, nurturing a more interconnected and supportive community capable of addressing challenges collectively.

Women's engagement with social justice issues lends a powerful voice to synodal discussions on justice, equality, and human rights. A woman with a background in social advocacy can bring forth insights into addressing systemic injustices within the church. For instance, she might advocate for policies that promote gender equality in leadership positions,

drawing from her experiences in advocating for women's rights in the broader societal context. This infusion of perspectives can catalyse a more socially conscious and responsible church, actively addressing contemporary issues through synodal deliberations and shaping a path towards justice and equality.

Women and women religious are at the forefront of educational initiatives and they play a pivotal role in cultivating a culture of continuous learning and spiritual development within the church. A woman who is actively engaged in organising workshops, study groups, or online courses can foster spiritual growth among the church members. Her commitment to educational initiatives may result in a more informed and spiritually mature community wherein individuals can be equipped with the knowledge and insights to deepen their faith. Through these educational endeavours, women contribute tangibly to the formation of a church community that values lifelong learning, nurturing a sense of intellectual curiosity and spiritual enrichment.

The heightened involvement of women in synodality could serve as a compelling model for younger generations within the church, inspiring them to engage actively. When young individuals witness women taking prominent roles in synodal discussions, leading initiatives, and shaping the direction of the church, it serves as a motivating factor. This first-hand exposure can inspire a new generation of leaders who inherently value gender equality and inclusivity. Young girls, seeing their senior counterparts actively contributing to decision-making processes, may envision themselves as future leaders, fostering a culture that recognises and encourages diverse leadership roles. In this way, the increased participation of women in synodality becomes a transformative force, laying the groundwork for a church where future leaders embrace the principles of equality and inclusivity.

Recommendations for Promoting Women's Participation and Leadership

Empowering women in the Catholic Church in India requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses theological, cultural, social and structural barriers. The following pages present concrete suggestions designed to promote women's greater participation and leadership within the church community. These recommendations aim to establish meaningful pathways for women to contribute their gifts and talents at all levels of church life and ministry.

Inclusive Theological Education

Ensuring inclusive theological education is vital for justice and equality in the church, recognising the diverse gifts of both men and women. Jesus himself exemplified this inclusivity through his revolutionary approach to women in his ministry. He welcomed women as disciples and learners, as seen when he defended Mary of Bethany's right to sit at his feet and learn, declaring that "she has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). This involves providing equal opportunities, such as establishing scholarship programmes to encourage women to undertake studies in theology, Scripture, canon law and pastoral ministry.

In India, the church must promote the inclusion of gender issues in the theological curriculum, creating a supportive learning environment through mentorship programmes and adopting a gendered approach to theology. Jesus demonstrated such supportive mentorship when he engaged the Samaritan woman in deep theological discourse about worship and salvation (John 4:7–26), treating her as a capable theologian despite cultural barriers. This approach will reveal the true status of women in the church, society, and the family. This will also bring to light the biblical depictions of men and women's relationships, leading to the emphasis of the distinction between cultural practices in the Bible and contemporary cultures, underscoring the equal creation of men and women in God's image. Jesus consistently challenged cultural limitations placed on women,

as demonstrated when he allowed Mary Magdalene to be the first witness and proclaimer of his resurrection (John 20:11–18), entrusting her with the most important theological message in Christian history. Besides, encouraging Catholic women to pursue theological education, regardless of ordination, underscores its relevance for the entire people of God.

Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery

Gender-inclusive language and imagery play a crucial role in creating a more equitable environment within the church. By revising liturgical practices, religious texts, and visual representations, the church can actively recognise and honour the dignity of both men and women. This foundation is rooted in Jesus’s own ministry, where he consistently used diverse imagery in his parables—speaking of both the woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the shepherd seeking his lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7) to describe God’s love. His teaching that “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) provides theological grounding for such practices. Jesus demonstrated this equality when he chose to reveal his resurrection first to Mary Magdalene, commissioning her as “apostle to the apostles” (John 20:17–18).

The Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent” (no. 29). This shift towards greater participation resonates with the evolving understanding of gender roles in contemporary society and within the synodal church.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasizes that “the Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess” (no. 103). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman” (no. 369). Practical implementation involves using gender-

neutral language in liturgical practices, updating religious texts to ensure universal applicability, creating balanced visual representations, adopting neutral pronouns in religious communications, and revising liturgical songs. The recent Synod on Synodality emphasizes that “a synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility,” calling for “the full involvement of all the baptized” regardless of gender.

Mentorship and Leadership Training

In the context of Indian Catholic women, establishing mentorship and leadership training programmes is imperative to empower women for prominent roles within the church. Jesus himself exemplified this mentorship model when he guided Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women who “provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:2-3), preparing them to become witnesses and leaders in the early Christian community.

By creating such initiatives, the church can nurture capable women leaders, ensuring their active participation in synods and ecclesiastical life. Saint Teresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, exemplifies how proper spiritual mentorship empowered women to assume significant leadership roles, reforming the Carmelite order and contributing to church renewal. A practical approach involves pairing experienced female leaders with aspiring women seeking guidance. For instance, a seasoned theologian or respected leader could mentor young women studying theology or entering pastoral ministry.

Leadership training initiatives for women within the church should prioritize equipping them with essential skills to face the complexities of leadership roles. Tailored workshops and seminars covering effective communication, pastoral care, organizational leadership, and theological discourses are crucial. Since women’s identities are constructed by their society and culture, taking a critical approach to culture is essential for developing leadership in women in a manner that liberates them from patriarchal constraints.

Promotion of Women to Decision-Making Bodies

In the ongoing discourse surrounding synodality, a concerning trend persists within the church where women remain largely confined to traditional roles such as singing, conducting choirs, arranging flowers, decorating altars, organizing sodalities, or working in diocesan offices primarily within family and women's commissions. This limitation contradicts the Gospel witness where women held significant leadership positions in the early church.

Scripture reveals women in authoritative roles: Phoebe served as a deacon and “benefactor of many” (Romans 16:1–2), while Priscilla instructed the eloquent Apollos in theology alongside her husband (Acts 18:26). Jesus himself broke cultural barriers by commissioning Mary Magdalene as the first herald of his resurrection, earning her the patristic title “apostle to the apostles.”

The church must recognize and tap into the immense reservoir of talent within women, empowering them to assume influential administrative and leadership roles. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, acknowledges that “demands that legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity” (no. 104). Breaking from restrictive traditions, the church must integrate women into positions of authoritative influence within religious institutions.

Empowering women by appointing them as chancellors in dioceses and secretaries for various regional or national commissions within the Catholic Church in India infuses diverse perspectives into administrative processes. This shift fosters comprehensive approaches to addressing community needs. The resulting transformation positions the church to build an equitable ecclesiastical community, demonstrating the invaluable richness that diversity contributes to the collective journey of faith.

Encouragement of Dialogue and Listening

To create a more synodal and participatory church environment, it is crucial to encourage open dialogue and active listening, particularly

towards women. This involves establishing spaces where women's voices are valued and actively sought out, ensuring their perspectives play an integral role in synodal discussions. This approach finds its foundation in Jesus's ministry, where he engaged women in profound theological dialogue. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–42) demonstrates revolutionary listening, as he not only heard her questions but entrusted her with evangelizing her entire community.

The synodal process places strong emphasis on listening rather than preaching from its inception. It recognises that listening is indispensable, and the purpose of the Synod, as stated in the Preparatory Document, “is not to produce documents, but ‘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, give strength to our hands’” (no. 32). This ideal is actualised through mutual listening, learning, and the demonstration of collegiality in the way the church lives.

Saint John Chrysostom praised women's capacity for theological discourse, noting how women in the early church “philosophized” about divine matters and contributed to doctrinal understanding. Contemporary theologian Ivone Gebara argues that women's experiential knowledge offers essential insights for theological reflection and informed decision-making within the church.¹⁸

An effective method for fostering this dialogue is through dedicated forums or roundtable discussions, providing women from diverse backgrounds with platforms to share their experiences, insights, and aspirations. These gatherings serve as genuine conversation spaces, allowing women to express their thoughts on theological and practical aspects of church life. The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that “all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of

¹⁸ Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, “A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 89–106.

inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence” (no. 62). By actively seeking and valuing women’s input, the church demonstrates its commitment to recognizing their unique perspectives in ecclesiastical discussions.

Recognition and Celebration

To promote a culture of appreciation and inclusivity within the Catholic Church, it is essential to recognise and celebrate the significant contributions made by women formally. This involves actively showcasing their achievements, disseminating success stories, and publicly acknowledging the crucial roles they play across various ministries. By doing so, the church validates women’s valuable work and creates an environment that inspires and encourages their active participation in synodality. A concrete manifestation of this recognition involves establishing annual events or ceremonies dedicated to honouring women in the church. By spotlighting women’s achievements, the church demonstrates a commitment to appreciating and celebrating women’s diverse talents and contributions. Additionally, incorporating women’s success stories into church publications, newsletters, TV channels, or online platforms could amplify their visibility and impact, serving as inspirational narratives for other women to engage in synodal processes actively.

Moreover, leveraging social media platforms offers an effective means of reaching a broader audience. Regularly featuring stories, testimonials, or video interviews of women engaged in various ministries can create an online space that celebrates their contributions, bringing visibility to women’s roles within the church and fostering a sense of connectedness and inspiration among the larger Catholic community.

Pastoral Support for Work-Life Balance

The Catholic Church acknowledges women’s varied roles in families and communities, advocating for proactive pastoral support to foster harmonious work-life balance. The church must implement measures

empowering women to engage fully in synodal processes without compromising their responsibilities.

Practical support includes flexible meeting schedules for synodal discussions, allowing participation without straining family commitments, and providing childcare services during gatherings to enable active participation in decision-making processes. These accommodations reflect the church's dedication to creating environments where women's voices are actively sought.

Additionally, embracing technology through virtual attendance and remote contribution options promotes accessibility and inclusivity. This approach values the diversity of women's experiences within the church, fostering a more participatory and representative synodal process.

Sustained Advocacy for Gender Equality

The Catholic Church can significantly advance gender equality by actively encouraging and supporting advocacy groups and movements within its community. One concrete way to achieve this is through fostering partnerships with organizations dedicated to promoting women's rights and empowerment. For example, the church could collaborate with non-profit organizations specializing in women's education and healthcare, aligning its efforts with broader societal movements striving for gender inclusivity and raising awareness about gender-based violence.

Establishing and endorsing initiatives focusing on gender equality within the church is another impactful approach. By supporting and promoting internal advocacy groups that address gender-related issues, the church demonstrates its commitment to fostering an environment where women are valued and treated with equity.

By addressing gender issues through sermons, workshops, YouTube videos, and study groups, the church can actively engage its members in conversations that challenge traditional gender norms and contribute to fostering a culture of gender equality. By implementing these recommendations, the Catholic Church can empower women as engines of synodality,

creating a more inclusive, vibrant, and responsive community that reflects the diverse gifts and talents of all its members.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women constitute indispensable engines of synodality within the Catholic Church in India, a reality that demands recognition through a critical feminist theological lens. St. Catherine of Siena's prophetic call for acknowledging women's God-given mission echoes with urgent contemporary relevance in the Indian context, where women's transformative ecclesial contributions have been systematically undervalued.

Critical feminist theology reveals that excluding women's voices and leadership diminishes the church's capacity for authentic synodal discernment. Women's wisdom, pastoral sensitivity, and theological insights are essential, not supplementary, components of genuine communal discernment. The path forward requires structural transformation: moving beyond tokenistic inclusion toward genuine participation in decision-making, theological reflection, and pastoral leadership. In a rapidly changing Indian society, the church's witness depends significantly on embodying the Gospel's inclusive vision.

For the Indian Catholic Church, women's full participation represents a profound opportunity for renewal and growth. This transformation promises not only greater fidelity to gospel values but also a more vibrant and responsive ecclesial community that truly reflects the diverse gifts of all God's people.

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6. Unheard, Untold, and Lived: Carving a Path Together to Reclaim the Good

Helen Romero

A Story Untold

This chapter unveils the lived experience of a woman, Naomi, who struggled in a marriage that almost negated her personhood.¹ When she finally found the courage to break free, she filed for a civil annulment and was granted it. However, she felt negated yet again upon reading the court decision that ruled her marriage “Void *ab initio*.” She grappled with the abuses of her husband in this marriage that had just been declared null by the court. She felt voided herself in a marriage that almost destroyed her, yet that union she had endured did not really exist in the judgment of the family court. In her struggle to reclaim her worth and rebuild her life, she found love with another woman, and this time, she wants this to matter. Her voice is one that might challenge a synodal church to listen to the real experience of one person who finds herself on the margins. Although she walked away from her marriage, she never left the church nor abandoned her faith. In her persistent and humble prayer, she experienced God’s mercy that gave her the strength to live again. It made her appreciate her value despite what had happened to her and the current relationship she finds herself in. The physical touch that restored Naomi’s trust in her own body also seems to have fueled her desire to receive the body of Christ. It is a touch that purges the repulsion she felt toward her own body. Coming

¹ This is a fictional name given to the participant of this study in order to protect her identity and preserve the confidentiality required in this phenomenological investigation, using the IPA. This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) process of the University of San Agustin, Iloilo City, Philippines. An informed consent form was signed by the participant on April 13, 2023.

out of an abusive relationship, this appears to be the beginning of Naomi's healing. Could the church provide a space for Naomi to explore deeply her faith with her same-sex partner?

In calling the community to become a synodal church, Pope Francis has opened the door to listen to people at the margins. This woman is definitely marginal and feels it deeply. In this forum of EWA, I want to bring her story to start a conversation that asks if we as women in the church can hear her story with open ears. I am trusting that this is a "third space" where women can speak openly from the heart.

In this chapter, I present her experience as one who seeks recognition in a church that considers her relationship illicit, or as one that is viewed as *intrinsece malum*. In the language of the moral tradition of the church, especially contained in Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, an intrinsic evil is seen as an act that is "incapable of being ordered" to God because it "radically contradicts the good of the person made in [God's] image" (no. 80).

Certainly, the existence of evil cannot be denied. Acts against humanity that are deliberately intentioned and systematically carried out to harm others should not be permitted because they destroy the good and the dignity of the human person, whether they are the victim or perpetrator of the evil act. Pope Francis acknowledges the existence of evil, although he uses the term mortal sins to point to these destructive acts rather than intrinsic evil (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 301). This phrase is not even mentioned in his exhortation that touches upon divorce, remarriage, civil unions, and to certain extent homosexual unions (*Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 250–251). He rather calls for a pastoral accompaniment to those mired in these situations so they can be fully integrated into the sacramental life of the church. This pastoral approach recognizes that it could be possible that even "in an objective situation of sin," a person could be "living in God's grace, can love, and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305). Naomi's story seems to echo this point, as while she lives with her partner, she is still able to

recognize God's mercy and grace that opened her eyes to her own dignity and worth as a person. Grace is not lost in a heart that seeks God's mercy.

Pope Francis exhorts the faithful to offer mercy and guidance to those who find themselves in situations that seem to limit their ability or stifle their capacity to meet the moral standards of the church. I situate her lived experience in this call in *Amoris Laetitia*. I contend, however, that before any form of pastoral accompaniment can be proposed, a space is needed to allow for the sharing of experiences to happen. It is here, thus, that the lived experience of Naomi is unpacked and discussed.

This chapter seeks to find a common ground where both moral theology—as brought out in *Veritatis Splendor*—and the lived experience of the baptized living in same-sex unions can meet. How does one inform the other? How can this be brought into conversation with the church's moral tradition? These questions guide the flow of this chapter, which examines the understanding of the church on issues relating to love, intimacy, marriage, and family life. The major document used here is *Amoris Laetitia*, especially concerning those in cohabiting relationships, similar to the lived experience of Naomi.

The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used in this chapter to help surface how Naomi makes sense of her experience from her previous to current relationship status. The qualitative research framework of IPA examines “how people make sense of their major life experiences.”² This qualitative method draws its theoretical framework from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and an idiographic approach, as it focuses on a phenomenon uniquely experienced by the individual.³

Using IPA as a methodology affords Naomi a space to retell her story, and in the process, reflect on what transpired in her life. Here, she is able to unveil God's presence in the midst of her troubled past, broken marriage, and current relationship status. Through IPA, Naomi is able to

² Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research* (Sage, 2009), 1–3.

³ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

recover her voice to share how her relationship with a woman restores her trust in her own body and self. This is the space where she desires to be recognized and accompanied by the church in her journey to reclaim her worth, in a relationship where she experienced God's mercy and grace, in her past and present state.

A Story Retold: A Space of Recollection and Recognition

Naomi shared her lived experience as a person who finds herself in a same-sex union after breaking off from an abusive husband. Her experience, however, cannot speak for all or make a broader claim about the findings of this chapter. It may contribute though, to carving a pathway where a person who is willing to stake their claim in the church, could share their experience, however harrowing.

I initially approached Naomi for referrals for my dissertation project on cohabiting unions. This piqued her curiosity. Thus, I arranged various meetings with her to discuss the criteria of selection of participants. She expressed her interest in sharing her own experience with the project.

She started as my conversation partner, and I conveyed to her what I wished to uncover: the grace and mercy of God as they are recognized by those in cohabiting relationships. The purpose, however, is not simply to see how these phenomena appear but also to examine how they are recognized by those in complex relationships. The larger concern is how to host mercy and grace and to provide a space for deeper exploration of these lived experiences.

Having laid out this framework, Naomi asked me to practice the interview questions with her. This is the genesis of this IPA exploration. The conversation partner becomes herself the host in this theological exploration of a lived experience in a same-sex union, categorized by the church as intrinsically disordered.

She brought her experience as a person who in her adult life, sought baptism in the Catholic Church in order to marry one who was baptized in the faith. Thirteen years later, her marriage fell apart despite efforts to join church-sponsored faith organizations like Marriage Encounter,

Gugma sang Diyos (Love of God), and spiritual direction from their parish priest. The married couple also joined other groups from the Jehovah Witnesses in the hope of saving their marriage.

What she shared comes from her personal perspective as she broke all her connections with her ex-husband when the marriage was civilly annulled. This chapter, then, can only present her lived experience without the view of the other half.

In this particular engagement, I deploy the concept of just hospitality which is taken from the original work of feminist theologian Letty M. Russell. In one of her papers, Russell defines hospitality as, “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching out across [differences] to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing in our world of crisis and the fear of the ones we call ‘other.’ As strangers to ourselves and to so many people, we have this possibility of learning to trust ourselves and others as a sign of God’s concern for us all, and for all creation.”⁴

This definition anchors Russell’s feminist, postcolonial hermeneutic of hospitality where she exposes the power imbalance where the stranger is considered an ontological “other” that needs to be changed into the likeness of the dominant group.⁵ She describes the “other” as those with different “nationality, skin color, gender, sexual orientation” from the “dominant political, economic, and social norm.”⁶

Russell’s concept of a “world of riotous difference”⁷ characterizes hospitality not simply to welcome the “other” but also to recognize the differences and offer a space for this “riotous diversity” to emerge and not be silenced by the dominant other.⁸ This hospitality is based on justice, not merely on the capacity of the host to welcome the “other” in their own

⁴ Letty M. Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other’ in a World of Difference and Danger,” *Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (October 2006): 467.

⁵ See also Sally Stamper, “Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 243.

⁶ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 459.

⁷ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 462.

⁸ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 467.

space. This finds an echo in the basic premise of synodality, the theme of this conference, which offers a process to encourage people to become open to differing positions and opinions.

Russell applies the concept from the experience of the Presbyterian Church in the US. I use the phrase “riotous diversity” to try to engender a spirit of participation, communion, and mission with the believing community that struggles to be faithful to the teaching of the church in a world that is in a constant state of flux.

Russell posits that hospitality calls for a welcoming of differences that does not resort to easy unity or what she refers to as “cheap unity” where the “other” who is different from the dominant group is asked to submit to the “one interpretation of faith in Christ.”⁹ This seems to echo what Pope Francis exhorts in *Amoris Laetitia*: “Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it” (no. 3).

Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis: Being Attentive to What Appears

As previously stated, Naomi’s lived experience is scrutinized using the IPA. While relatively new in theological exploration, IPA has existed since the mid-1990s. It is used in studies in psychology, health, nursing, and education, and is now being explored in other fields, such as environmental philosophy.¹⁰ The rise of the popularity of qualitative research methodologies, especially in the human, social, and health sciences, may be attributed to the seeming disaffection with the limitations

⁹ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 467.

¹⁰ See Susann M. Laverty, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (September 2003): 21–35, doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303. Also see Kalpita Bhar Paul, “Introducing Interpretive Approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Environmental Philosophy in the Anthropocene,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (August 2017): 1–10, doi.org/10.1177/1609406917724916.

of quantitative methods to explore deeper questions on “meaning rather than prediction.”¹¹

While IPA draws largely from phenomenology, it does not attempt to operationalize this philosophy but rather draws some significant concepts from it to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences, and the manner they are examined and interpreted.¹² This seeming fluid treatment of phenomenology in IPA, propounded by Jonathan A. Smith, signifies that the methodology is not static but rather dynamic. It continues to evolve; hence it is not constrained by the conceptual limitations of phenomenology as developed by Edmund Husserl.¹³

This is, however, criticized by scholars like Amedeo Giorgi, who views IPA as problematic because it does not meet the scientific general criteria.¹⁴ His critique comes from his observation that Smith hardly mentions science in his articles or in the book he co-wrote on IPA; neither does he identify the necessary steps taken that may possibly replicate IPA.¹⁵

The methodology is concerned with “exploring experience in its own terms.”¹⁶ Lived experiences are not replicable nor are they experienced the same way by other individuals. What IPA does is to probe the significance of an experience and bring out the reflections of the individual experiencing it.¹⁷ This makes the methodology interpretive not only descriptive, and as such, IPA is “informed by hermeneutics.”¹⁸

In this chapter, the methodology is fluidly designed to show how phenomenology could provide a staging area for a theological exploration of a lived experience. It seeks to find an appropriate interpretive key that

¹¹ Lavery, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology,” 21.

¹² Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 6.

¹³ Lavery, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology,” 22.

¹⁴ Amedeo Giorgi, “IPA and Science: A Response to Jonathan Smith,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 42, no. 2 (2011): 196.

¹⁵ Giorgi, “IPA and Science,” 196.

¹⁶ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 1.

¹⁷ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

¹⁸ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

recognizes the singularity of each experience as lived by a human person who partakes in the incarnated reality of God’s mercy and grace.

The Lived Experience Observed by the Other: Findings and Discussion

The lived experience of Naomi on mercy and grace surfaced when asked the following questions: 1) How did she meet her current partner? and 2) What sustained her (then and now) in this relationship? The questions were posed also in Hiligaynon:¹⁹

1. *Pwede mo bala isaysay sa akon kon paano nagsugod o kon paano ka nagsulod sa sining relasyon?* (Could you share how your relationship started?)
2. *Ano ang nagpabaskug sa imo sa sining relasyon?* (What sustained you in this relationship?)

She was also asked regarding her experience of the church, what she went through from her marriage, to her annulment, and her current relationship status.

The Lived Experience of Mercy Interpreted

Naomi uses the Hiligaynon term “*pangampo*” to entreat and beseech God’s help through prayer. She also demonstrated the posture she assumes when she prays, kneeling and bowing close to the ground as if kissing the feet of God. She seems to consider herself not worthy, so she bows her head down almost at the level of God’s feet. But it is in this posture of prayer, in a humble position, that she experienced God’s mercy, uplifting her from

¹⁹ Hiligaynon is one of the major languages spoken in the Philippines. It is used in Iloilo City and the northern towns of the Province of Iloilo along its coastline. It is also widely spoken in the Province of Negros Occidental, located in the same region as Iloilo, the Western Visayas. Naomi hails from this region, where she was born, raised, and educated. She still lives in one of the major cities in the Western Visayas region.

her misery, almost cleansing her body from the repulsion she felt about it, in Hiligaynon, “*nangil-ad ako*.” In her account, mercy is manifested in her being able to hug her own body, dispelling her feeling of revulsion. It is also when she allowed another to embrace her that she felt mercy. This touch comes from someone the church views as “intrinsically disordered.” She is in a same-sex union yet she does not find this physical touch revolting.

Then she laid out something that seems to challenge conventional belief in relationships.

I know from experience that God listens to my prayers. But now, I am not sure whether being with my partner is an answer to my prayer or not. I could only say this. When I was in a normal relationship, married to a man, I was physically and psychologically abused, bullied, disrespected, violated. Then I met someone who restored my trust in my body and myself.

But it was not considered normal. I am in a same-sex union where I felt overjoyed, loved, provided [for], and respected. So what is normal? What is acceptable?²⁰

From her sharing, mercy is something that is invoked, a movement toward God through humble prayer. This signifies her dependence on God, especially in moments when she feels so helpless, impotent, and about to give up. In her own account,

Nagapangampo ako (I entreated God to help me). God is my only recourse . . . I worked at a government agency that handles violence against women, yet there I was battered and abused. *Amo lang ini ang akon mahimo* (This was all I could do [pray]).

²⁰ This was from the interview conducted on April 15, 2023.

She felt ashamed for not being able to do something about her situation. She felt unworthy and filthy, in her own words “*nangil-ad na gid ako sa akon nga lawas*” (I find my body repulsive). Yet when she prayed, she felt cleansed and experienced God’s mercy. In her humble posture, her body becomes aware of God’s presence. It is in this lowly position that she experienced being uplifted by God. Then she found someone who gave her comfort. But she is also a woman. A lesbian. It is like jumping from an abusive relationship to one that is unacceptable, almost forbidden.

She reflected on this experience: “All I know is that God listened to me, as I finally found the courage to break free from that abusive relationship.” It seems enough that God listens to her cries. The presence of her partner, though, seems to give her the push to walk away from such an abusive relationship. Through prayer, she also finds her voice and a new purpose. Mercy empowers. This led her to share her experience publicly which was printed in a local chapter to raise awareness on violence against women. She finds a renewed strength to continue what she used to do.

Although God responded to her prayer, she also admitted, “There are things that I never understand. But I know that when I pray to God, I feel at peace. I still feel anger well up within me, so I pray because I tend to lash out. I am capable of harming others as well, so I continue to pray for mercy.” She disclosed here that she sometimes feels like smothering her ex-husband to death. Naomi confessed having murderous thoughts against her husband. But in her own reflection, mercy helps her curb her violent thoughts, and her prayer prevents her from actualizing them. The interview about mercy took place on the day before Divine Mercy Sunday which in 2023 fell on April 16. On that Sunday, when I attended mass, I did what she always does, prayed to God for her intentions.

Mercy uplifts and raises her despite some of her misgivings. It gives her the courage to share publicly her experience of abuse in order to help others recognize its patterns. Mercy also enables her to deal with her temper. Despite being abused by her husband, she refrained from retaliating. In this sense, mercy empowers her to respond nonviolently to

her situation. She always seems to describe the presence of mercy “by being at peace.”

But something still bothers her. We forayed then into the realm of grace. In her own lived experience, she feels that God is still present regardless of her relationship status: same-sex union. In her own reflection, God still cares and understands. And she is astonished with this considering what she did: walked away from her marriage and entered into this same-sex union. In her own words, “I feel that God still cares for me even in this relationship.”

She is in a long-distance relationship with her lesbian partner. Also, at her age (early 60’s), she is simply content lying in bed, “just talking about almost anything under the sun.” She laughed nervously when she talked about her physical relationship with her partner. But beyond that she values their friendship, a connection she never felt in her marriage. Naomi wishes to spend the rest of her life with her lesbian partner.

Despite the complex relationship she is in now, she remains in church and continues to go regularly to Sunday mass. She also expressed her wish to receive communion the way she did when she was still married but abused. She recounted that if she came late for mass and missed the part where the assembly recites the prayer, “I confess to almighty God . . .,” she would make an effort to attend another mass. She seems to consider this part important. In fact, when she shared this experience, she struck her breast while reciting the whole penitential prayer in this interview! She explained that she feels connected to God and the community when she goes to mass. She considers the mass as a “complete package,” although she misses the regular interaction she had when she used to attend different organizations in the church when she had marital problems

The Lived Experience of Grace Interpreted

Naomi considers grace as the presence of God not only within her but also in the community and she seems to feel this acutely when she goes to Sunday mass. But she seems to consider that people frown on her relationship, perhaps because of its physical-union aspect. Hence, she

seems to steer the discussion away from it and focuses instead on the value of connection and friendship that develop from this union. She never had this connection in her previous marriage.

She admitted not going to confession ever since she was in this relationship. Naomi shared though that she “feels forgiven,” hence, she strives to go to Sunday mass regularly. Again, she mentioned being particularly attentive to the penitential act because she perceives this as a way where she could publicly acknowledge her sins in the assembly without going into the details. This is the part where she feels that her participation is needed, especially when she admitted that she would go to another mass again if she misses this penitential act where *Kyrie Eleison* or Lord Have Mercy is also recited. This is a prayer she is most familiar with.

She readily mentioned this penitential act when she identified grace in the liturgy. Naomi recognized the presence of God or in her words, “God still remains with me,” regardless of what she has done. Is this what grace is all about? The abiding presence and faithfulness of God despite “what we have done and failed to do.” It seems that with her desire to remain in the church, she exhibits her willingness to reorient herself to what could be “pleasing to God.”

Her responses seem to have been formed by the images she sees and words she hears from the mass, rather than by any explicit moral instruction. In her feeble way, she tries not only to shy away from discussing the physical aspect of her same-sex relationship but also attempts to bring the value of friendship that develops from this union. Naomi expresses her wish to grow old with her partner, in their physical bodies that could appreciate affectionate friendship without engaging in sexual acts. This seems her way of moving toward the good, in her weakened constitution, restored in part by the touch of her lesbian partner. Her humble prayers open up the portal to God’s mercy and grace and lead her to act.

Church Teachings as Dialogue Partners on the Path to Healing and Freedom

Amoris Laetitia may help explore avenues where individuals who are in complex situations (the divorced, remarried, and those in same-sex unions) could be brought into the dialogue with the view that they may be able to teach us about what it means to be a church in this contemporary world. The acts of couples in homosexual unions have been seen as “incapable of being ordered to God” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 82), because they do not fit neatly with the procreative nature of sex ascribed to marital unions.

Published in 2016, *Amoris Laetitia* was issued during the Jubilee of Mercy where the Pope encouraged the people to be “a sign of mercy” for families living in imperfect situations (no. 5). He invites us to offer mercy to those who find themselves in situations that “fall short of what the Lord demands of us” (no. 6).

This apostolic exhortation materialized from the two synods on the family called by Pope Francis: the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in October 2014 and the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in October 2015. These synods were preceded by local consultations.²¹

This listening process and the inclusion of other voices in the synod is a marriage itself of the ancient practice of the church in the first millennium and the demands of contemporary culture.²² The process does not only signal a shift in the participation of the laity in the church but likewise on the way doctrines or the official teachings of the church could be rethought and reinterpreted based on the “signs of the times” as proffered by the Council Fathers of Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4).

²¹ For context, especially on how this was done from the US experience, see Cardinal Donald Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*,” Georgetown Sacred Lecture Series, September 12, 2017, blog.adw.org/2017/09/georgetown-sacred-lecture-series-pope-francis-synodality-amoris-laetitia/.

²² Gerry O’Hanlon, “Ireland and the Quiet Revolution in the Catholic Church,” *The Furrow* 68, no. 5 (2017): 261, jstor.org/stable/44738549.

The recognition of the contribution of the lay baptized in the synods should not be underemphasized. The sharing of Naomi in this chapter, for example, points to the significance of the participation of the lay baptized in the discussion, as they themselves could lay bare their lives for scrutiny. In this way they could share with the believing community how they have navigated the treacherous terrain of marital relationships worn down by abuse, neglect, and betrayal. And through all this this, they have held on to their faith that gave them hope to love and live again.

Arnaud Join-Lambert, in his article “Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating the Fragility of Couples,” highlights the significance of synodality that needs to be put into practice.²³ He offers his own reflection here: “We shall arrive at the fullness of truth only at the end of time. In the present time, we remain marked by our multiple cultural contexts, which make different interpretations possible. The very reason for the existence of the church is to make it possible for these cultures to be embodied against the horizon of unity, and hence of hope.”²⁴

Although this raises resistance and disagreement from some sectors of the church’s hierarchy, *Amoris Laetitia* reframes the dialogue within the purview of pastoral ministry and theology.²⁵ Synodality is given a new emphasis by Pope Francis, where “journeying together,” involves the “whole Church, pastors and flock, walking and working together to explore the needed pastoral responses to the challenges of today.”²⁶ A synodal church opens a pathway for untold stories to be heard. It gives a space for someone like Naomi to disclose what it is like to recognize God’s magnanimous response to her plea for mercy. This impels her to remain in

²³ Arnaud Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating the Fragility of Couples: Pastors and Theologians at a Crossroads,” in *A Point of No Return? Amoris Laetitia on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, ed. Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi (LIT Verlag, 2017), 141–161.

²⁴ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 147–148.

²⁵ See James F. Keenan, “Regarding *Amoris Laetitia*: Its Language, Its Reception, Some Challenges, and Agnosticism of Some of the Hierarchy,” *Perspectiva Teológica* 53, no. 1 (2021): 41–60, doi.org/10.20911/21768757v53n1p41/202.

²⁶ Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*.”

the church. In her own words, “*Ano na lang ang matabo sa akon kon madulaan pa ako sang pagtoo?*” (What would become of me if I lose my faith?). In her fractured and troubled married life, praying to God became her only path toward reclaiming not only her worth, but her very life itself.

This area of ecclesial discourse undergoes a change in *Amoris Laetitia*. The synodal conversation engages the concrete realities of the faithful living in complex situations rather than simply viewing and discussing them in abstract terms.²⁷ Join-Lambert summons those who are in irregular unions and are “willing to take their place in the church” to participate in this synodal initiative.²⁸ They could offer their reflections of their own experiences and claim their space in the church. Their own participation constitutes their baptismal dignity.²⁹

The lived experience of the lay baptized, like that of Naomi, could be examined with the view that while “the bishops are the official teachers and guardians of the faith, the faith is also expressed and voiced among all the faithful.”³⁰ This builds upon the call of Vatican II to listen to the “sense of the faithful,” or be attentive to the “People of God as it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the earth” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1).

This shift of focus potentially provides a space where the in-breaking of the Spirit of God is recognized in the lives of those in complex relationships. Could this open a pathway where something viewed as “incapable of being ordered to God,” like same sex relationships, can be oriented toward the good?

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* opens with the question posed by the rich man in the Gospel of Matthew, “Teacher, what good must I do?” (Matthew 19:16). The Gospels of Mark and Luke also carry the story of this encounter. However, in Luke, this rich man is also identified as a ruler (Luke 18:18). In all three accounts, Jesus addresses the question of the rich man by first laying out what is good, “There is only one who is good”

²⁷ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 157, 160.

²⁸ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 157.

²⁹ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 159.

³⁰ Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*.”

(Matthew 19:17). Mark and Luke present the scene with Jesus explicitly referring to this good as God, “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19). Pope John Paul II underscores this, “*Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself*” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9).

We could also glean from this encounter that despite following the commandments handed down to Moses and cited by Jesus, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:18–19, also in Mark 10:19 and Luke 18:20), the rich man still seeks what is good. It appears that keeping these commandments could still leave a person searching for the good.

This exchange between the rich man and Jesus may help shape the pastoral accompaniment for same sex couples. Perhaps this could also inform the believing community of the conditions that could block the Spirit of God from breaking into the lives of the faithful and inhibit them from flourishing.

This circles back to the significance of a synodal church. The experiences of those in complex situations, like Naomi’s, could invite the church to enter into the disturbing messiness of these experiences that do not seem to adhere to conventional patterns. They too, however, deserve to be recognized because they also have something to offer about the ways the good is experienced in their lives. Pope St. John Paul II himself recognized the person’s capacity to experience the good even if at times the action of the individual seems to contradict the “objective moral order” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 62).

Now let us go back to the gospel story cited in *Veritatis Splendor*. It is curious that while Jesus explicitly mentions the commandments that pertain to human interactions, Jesus is quite subtle about the rich man’s relationship with God. After he tells the rich man to sell what he has and give what he owns to the poor, he invites him to “then come follow me” (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22).

Only God is good. The Word made flesh, the God with us, is the Supreme Pastor of the Church. This underlines Pope Francis's exhortation to move forward as a church and bring mercy to those in most need of it. God is not only Good. God is mercy itself.

How can the church help a human person "be oriented to God?"

Revisiting Mercy and Grace for a Synodal Praxis

The lived experience explored in this chapter, while not representative of a broader population, could present opportunities for the church to open avenues of engagement where experiences of people in same sex unions could be shared. This, however, prompts the question, "Could the church see the person's experience from another light?" Could the church consider it as a manifestation of God's loving kindness? This question shifts the focus to mercy and grace. God responds to those who humbly implore mercy. God stays close to those who cry for mercy and fall short of the church's moral standard. These could provide an entry point where Naomi's pleas may be heard. Naomi's lived experience offers a glimpse of how she deals with a moral dilemma.

The church's moral tradition serves as a reliable guide to a right and just Christian living. This tradition governed by moral norms, however, ultimately serves the value of the good of the human person. In a pastoral accompaniment, these norms could be clarified to help the person achieve the good or abide by the sacramental discipline required of their condition. The basic consideration is how these norms could help those in cohabiting relationships live righteously, or at the most basic, retain their dignity as humans loved into existence by God. A pastoral accompaniment based on mercy emboldens the church to opt for a more loving option. Being loved by another person is an initial step to this consummate Love, profoundly expressed in the Eucharistic liturgy and on the cross.

"How could the church allow for other views to emerge based on experiences that may run counter to the Church's moral tradition?" Russell's concept on the "riotous difference" may be of help as we could see that despite the messiness of one's life, one could still get a glimpse of

God's mercy and grace as shared by Naomi. It seems that when she reflects on her lived experience, she is given a space to be "reoriented to God." She herself identified the ways by which she was able to recognize mercy and grace, through her humble posture, prayer and participation in the liturgy. Naomi pays special attention to the readings and the homilies to help her rebuild her life after being in an abusive relationship and finding herself in a same-sex union. But while she strives toward the good, there are conditions and canonical structures that limit her options toward a full participation in the sacramental life of the church, like receiving communion. But because she still continues to go to Sunday mass, she bears witness to how the common faith in Jesus in the Gospels, in the Eucharist, and in her own personal experience could meet in the liturgy. In this space, the good news is continually proclaimed and celebrated (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24).³¹

This points to a need to transform ecclesial spaces where the faithful can explore the meaning of their lived experience, share their reflections, and articulate what it is like to live in mercy and grace in their conflicted states. This is particularly highlighted by Naomi in her experience of going to church on a regular basis. Here, the church "evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24).³² This enlivens the life of the church, and calls the church to an ecclesial conversion to be open to a "constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ."³³ The end point of going to church is not to be a perfect Catholic but to grow into and with Christ, to be the light of the world plunged into darkness by troubled and wounded loves.

³¹ In this exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights the importance of evangelization or the proclamation of God's goodness in the liturgy.

³² In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls for a church that takes the path of a "pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are" (no. 25).

³³ Pope Francis specifically cited the work of the Second Vatican Council on the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 6.

The Synod on the Family in 2014 recognized the significance of walking together with those in complex relationships, such as Naomi's. Here, the synod expressed the desire to "help them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and [offer] them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God's plan for something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Relatio Synodi*, no. 25). Naomi could occupy this synodal space where she could share what she learned from her humble prayer to God and God's magnanimous response to her plea. Again, this highlights the view that although the bishops are guardians of the faith, the laity have also something to share about being "taught from above," a Johannine phrase that connotes being taught by God. In this regard, a synodal space could be a learning space where all the baptized, both clergy and laity, could exchange notes on how they were taught "from above." In the lived experience of Naomi, she was taught from above when she bowed down almost touching the ground. Could this be the space where God is found, not above but beneath us?

This chapter raises more questions than answers, because we are just beginning to reflect on a synodal space where "riotous differences" do not restrain the Spirit of God from breaking into the lives of those who call on God's mercy and grace through persistent prayer, humility, and hope. They need a just and hospitable space to grow in their emergent states with the community and with God.

How can the church host the people's groan for completion as they struggle to reclaim their worth and rebuild their lives?

Russell posits that hospitality is not only offered because one has a space to welcome the other.³⁴ Rather, it opens the space for the other to be able to explore their singularity and grow with the community. The lived experience shared by Naomi presents how she continues to carve a path via the liturgical life of the church in order to remain oriented to God. She stays in the church hoping that it could hold the space for her as she continues to rebuild her life under the shadow of God's mercy and grace.

³⁴ Russell, "Encountering the Other," 462.

In the midst of Naomi's fragmented life and broken vow, despite walking away from her marriage and finding herself in a same-sex union, Naomi experienced God's mercy that gave her strength to love and live again. It made her appreciate her value not only in the eyes of God but also in the eyes of her beloved partner. God's mercy is restorative. God's grace is life-giving, reorienting a life toward the good. In Naomi's desire to remain in the church, she makes a conscious effort to keep her relationship on a deeper level not only to abide by what the church teaches but to remain connected to God. She finds her voice and stakes her claim in a church as a woman of faith who broke away from an abusive marital situation and finds herself in a same-sex union. As could be gleaned from the interview, Naomi seems to think that people frown on her relationship because of its physical-union aspect. Hence, she seems to steer the discussion away from it and focuses instead on the value of the connection and friendship that develop from this union. The touch that restored her trust in her own body impels her to remain in church to become part of the body of Christ, broken, shared, and eaten.

The story of the hemorrhagic woman in the Synoptic Gospels comes to mind. The woman afflicted with this hemorrhagic condition came behind Jesus to touch his cloak believing that, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" (Mark 5:28).³⁵ Like the hemorrhagic woman, Naomi may have the same hope that if she could only eat the body of Christ, she could be restored. Both actions are forbidden. Yet both audaciously reached out to Jesus believing that he could heal them.

The prayer posture of Naomi is almost like a fetal position that reaches out to the source of her life. Both her faith and her relationship with a lesbian restored her to life. Her story suggests that God's mercy and grace can cut through an "intrinsically evil" act. There is nothing and nowhere in this world that could not be touched by God. This is the recognition that hits Naomi in her guts. God's magnanimous response overshadows the enormity of her sins. Could the church take this bold option to love?

³⁵ Found in all Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 5:22–43, and Luke 8:41–56.

Or, at the very least, not obstruct God's movement toward those who seek God's mercy and grace. Could the church offer such hospitality to God?

Conclusion

Naomi opened up her life for scrutiny, inviting others to enter into her wounded and troubled love, challenging the notion of a "disordered act" that could not be oriented to God. Yet in her humble prayer, she is able to recognize and experience God's mercy and grace that fueled her faith and gave her hope. In both shared and personal spaces, Naomi continues to rebuild her life signaling the need for a synodal church that listens with and learns from one another. It is a learning space with a God who teaches not from above but from beneath them as experienced by Naomi who lowered herself, almost kissing the ground, for God's mercy. A hospitable church makes way for this God who crouches beside those who cry in anguish, weighed down by wounded and troubled love. A just hospitable synodal space does not obstruct divine justice that is founded on grace and mercy.

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7. Women as Agents of Faith Formation in the Chinese Church: Synodal Signposts

Xiaoping Guo

Women as Primary Faith Formators in the History of the Catholic Church

In order to better comprehend the agency that Chinese Catholic women exercise in faith formation today, exemplifying what it means to evolve as church communities founded on the vision of synodality, I draw inspiration from women in the historical phase denoted as the early church. As early as the Jerusalem period, the family had already been the cradle for nurturing Christian faith and spiritual life. Numerous passages from the Scripture clearly describe the educational elements of Christian households. As Margaret Y. MacDonald points out, “When one approaches 1–2 Timothy and Titus with a focus on children, the house-church context emerges as a home-school context.”¹ In taking them as guidelines for the formation of children in a domestic setting, the Pastoral Epistles not only provide an educational program that integrates scriptural, doctrinal, ethical, and domestic elements; they also designate different roles and responsibilities to men and women.

Even though some Scripture passages convey a contradictory message about the status and role of women in the Christian community—such as the insistence on women remaining submissive (Ephesians 5:22) and refraining from public appearances (1 Corinthians 14:34)—other texts affirm women’s role in providing faith formation to their children and other Christians in a household and even community setting. 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:15 clearly place the duty of educating youth on women. Referring

¹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children* (Baylor University Press, 2014), 109.

to Titus 2:3–5, MacDonald argues that “the teaching role being assigned to the elders/fathers is in actual fact not terribly different from that assigned to older women, who must teach younger women, which no doubt included girls, what is good.”²

The study of Christian households and their educative function in the early church presents evidence that faith permeates every aspect of family life. Faith formation in the household settings often took place informally through daily conversation, family rituals, and most commonly, through setting life examples. Titus 2:1–10 makes explicit that an effective mode of teaching the Christian faith is through witness in the Christian household. As Scripture scholar Raymond Collins observes, “This household code stresses the witness value of the Christian message. The soundness of the message is proclaimed in the lives of all Christians, whether they be male or female, older or younger.”³ 2 Timothy 1:5 specially mentions the faith witness of mothers and grandmothers. Collins notes further that, “Older women are to instruct younger women in regard to feminine virtues; younger men are to learn the virtues of due discretion by following an example. By their example, virtuous people inspire others to be virtuous.”⁴ While the expression “feminine virtues” could pose a problem for realizing the synodal vision that takes women as equal disciples alongside men beyond gender stereotyped roles, it is important to acknowledge women’s agency for sustaining the faith of the Christian faithful within the household and in the ecclesial community.

The Teaching of the Catholic Church on Women Today

From the time of the early Christian household churches until now, the family is recognized as the foundation of the ecclesial community and of society. It is the first school of faith for future generations. The *General Directory for Catechesis* claims: “Parents are the primary educators in the

² MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, 127.

³ Raymond F. Collins, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 337.

⁴ Collins, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 334.

faith. Together with them, especially in certain cultures, all members of the family play an active part in the education of the younger members. It is thus necessary to determine more concretely the sense in which the Christian family community is a *locus* of catechesis” (no. 255).

In a similar vein, the Catholic Church holds that women have a unique and indispensable role in faith formation, both within the family and in the broader church community. Women, particularly mothers, are recognized as the primary educators of their children in the faith. Women’s educative role in the formation of faith has best been embodied in the life example of Mary. “The virgin Mary, who at the message of the angel received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world, is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer . . . far surpasses all creatures At the same time, however . . . she is one with all those who are to be saved” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 53). Mary’s unique role as bearer of Christ and her motherhood in the salvation of humanity can also be seen as emblematic of women’s—especially mothers’—role in bringing people into faith. Following the example of Mary, mother of Jesus, women are called to model Christian virtues and to cultivate an environment of love, prayer, and moral formation within the family. As a matter of fact, women often play a crucial role as catechists, teachers, and mentors in parishes, schools, and religious education programs. They serve in numerous leadership capacities within the church, such as pastoral associates, theologians, canon lawyers, and leaders of religious communities.

Pope Francis has repeatedly affirmed the need for women’s voices in decision-making within the church and called for greater inclusion of women in leadership roles.

It is true that women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church: not excluded, but the presence of women is very weak there, in decision-making processes. We must move forward. . . . For me the process leading to decisions is very important: not only the execution, but also the development, and therefore that women, both consecrated

and laywomen, become part of the reflection process, and part of the discussion. . . . Because women look at life through their own eyes and we men are not able to look at life in this way.

The Catholic Church is increasingly aware of the importance of women in society and in the life of the church. For Pope Francis, “The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition, and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. . . . The presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 103). Women are appreciated by the church as integral to the mission of faith formation, honoring their roles as educators, spiritual leaders, and witnesses to Christ. While certain roles remain reserved for men, the church emphasizes collaboration and the indispensable contributions of women to the life and growth of the faith.

Chinese Catholic Church—A Family-Oriented Faith Community

Rooted in the culture of the community and following the early Christian household model, Chinese Catholics have made their homes domestic churches. It is in their homes that religious devotion is being practiced, and faith is being embodied in their quotidian lives. Studies on the Catholic Church in China prior to and during the twentieth century demonstrate that Catholicism in China was never an individual faith. It has been the faith of whole families and clans, which have been the foundation and pillar of church communities. It is very common for the conversion of one family member, especially the patriarch, to lead to the conversion of the entire family. The major driving force behind this phenomenon of family conversion is the patriarchal nature and traditional Chinese culture of filial piety. As the head of the family or the patriarch of the clan, a man has the power to request the rest of his family/clan to follow his lead in matters of faith. The younger generation inherits their parents’ faith from the

moment of birth. Anyone, whether adult or child, who refuses to accept the faith is considered disrespectful to the patriarch—a betrayal of family values that results in marginalization by the entire clan. Thus, patriarchal notions are very much inscribed into faith practices, though women are the real agents of transmitting faith and sustaining it within the family.

In contrast to a male family member's conversion to Catholicism, a female's conversion rarely leads to the conversion of other family members. In fact, a woman's conversion to the faith often subjects her to rejection and discrimination by her family, as well as the risk of marginalization or even severe persecution, unless she is the matriarch. One exception to this marginalization occurs when a woman converts to the Catholic faith through marriage into a Catholic family.

The Chinese Family as the Locus of Catholic Faith

Chinese Catholic families have been places of evangelization and improvised catechetical schools. In a Chinese Catholic family, faith formation for children was carried out predominantly through family rituals, such as daily prayer, the practice of spiritual devotions, saying grace at the dinner table, and attending family Mass. Making faith an integral part of Chinese Catholic family life effectively safeguarded the continuity of Catholic faith from one generation to the next. Those Catholic families not only produced many devout believers, but they also encouraged many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. A study of genealogy of the Miao clan in part of southern China reveals that within four generations, male members of the Miao clan increased from 6 to 111 and made up a powerful force in the local church. Within a hundred years, twenty-five women from the Miao clan formally consecrated themselves as Catholic virgins.⁵

The <拳時北京教友致命> (Quan Shi Beijing Jiaoyou Zhiming) is a

⁵ Xiaoxin Wu, "Rapid Progress and Remarkable Accomplishments: The Study of Christianity in China by a New Generation of Chinese Scholars," in *China's Christianity: From Missionary to Indigenous Church*, ed. Anthony E. Clark (Brill, 2017), 282.

series of books that records the Boxer Rebellion around 1900 and the martyrdom of Catholics in Beijing and Hebei during that time.⁶ The last fifteen volumes of the book record a total of 370 Catholics who were baptized either as infants or as little children. Among them, 50.3 percent claimed that they were given a good Catholic education or faith formation by their parents, 7.8 percent attended parish school, and 5.4 percent became virgins and devoted their lives to the service of the church. The data reveal the paramount role of family in forming the new generation of Catholics during early twentieth century China.⁷

During the last four decades, many Catholic families in China have become cradles for new vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Hebei Faith Institute for Cultural Studies collected data on the family background of priests and religious sisters between 2009–2010. The result shows that traditional Catholic families often produce multiple vocations to church ministry and religious life. The data documents 693 clerics and women religious coming from more than 320 families. Among those families, one family had five vocations (two men and three women), and four families each produced four vocations. There are 274 families who produced more than one vocation. Even with the One-Child policy, there are still fifty-six families that sent their only child to the priesthood or religious life.⁸ These numbers reflect the great impact of the family spiritual environment on children as they grow in faith. Most of the priests and religious explored in the studies grew up between 1960s and the 1980s, when the churches were still shut down in China due to the Cultural Revolution. The only way children received faith formation was through the oral teachings of their family members, especially their mothers or grandmothers—and by following their example in family spiritual

⁶ Jean-Marie Planchet, 拳時北京教友致命 (*Chinese Martyrs in Beijing During the Boxer Rebellion*) (Beijing Jiushitang, 1920).

⁷ Planchet, 拳時北京教友致命, 235.

⁸ Xinde Editorial Department, “调查显示：全国有321个多圣召家庭 (Research Shows: There Are 321 Families that Produced Multiple Vocations to the Church),” *Xinde Culture Association*, December 30, 2011, xinde.org/show/13398.

devotions. In the absence of open churches, families functioning as true domestic churches, preserved and brought the faith to life among their family members, particularly the younger generations.

The Role of Women in Preserving and Educating Faith in Tibet, China

In the previous section, we discussed how Catholicism in China is a faith rooted in and nurtured within the family environment. This leads us to further explore the role of women, who play an important part in these familial and communitarian settings. To illustrate this, in this section, I take Yanjing Church, the only Catholic church in the entirety of Tibet, which is officially considered a territory of China. Examining how the church community there has been preserved through the efforts of female believers helps us to appreciate the significant contributions women have made in transmitting faith within the Chinese Church.

In Tibetan society and culture, there is both a positive recognition of women and a disdain and degradation of women that is influenced by male-centric thinking. Although Tibetan women do not hold high social status, they are the core of family life, responsible for all the daily affairs of the household. In traditional views, Tibetan women are seen as hardworking laborers, obedient servants, selfless contributors, virtuous wives, and great mothers. They work tirelessly day after day, bearing children, taking care of the family, and honoring the elders. However, they are not without power and dignity within the household. They have a decisive influence on internal family matters and hold a certain amount of power and status. When asked about who holds the most power in his household, male believer C from Yanjing Church openly stated that, within family life, neither the wife nor the husband controls the other, nor does anyone simply obey the other. In important matters, they discuss together, and they follow the one whose reasoning makes more sense.

The importance of women in Tibetan family life is also reflected in the history of the growth of Yanjing Church. Throughout numerous challenges and tests the Yanjing Church has demonstrated the perseverance,

resilience, and strength of a “women’s church.” In this context, it is important to acknowledge the contribution made by women religious and the contributions they have made towards the growth of the church community in Tibet.

Historically, Yanjing Village has produced six nuns. Four of them joined an indigenous congregation in the early 1940s, founded by foreign missionaries in Cizhong, Yunnan. Two others joined the Sisters of the Holy Family in the early 2000s. This latter congregation was established by a Chinese bishop after the reopening of the church in China at the beginning of the 1980s. Among the four who joined the convent before 1949, Sister Ani was sent back to her Yanjing home when the government disbanded their congregation in the early 1950s. Despite this, she remained single and upheld her vow of chastity. Another nun, Sister Theresa, who was with Sister Ani in the same convent during that period, also returned home. Due to health reasons, she later married. She is still alive today and affectionately known as Grandma De Ren.

Although the inability to continue their religious life might seem like a loss or source of regret on the surface, these two sisters played a crucial role in the survival of Yanjing Church. Upon returning home, Sister Ani continued to live a life of devotion, even without a community or fellow companions. Local government officials, aiming to suppress the church and the believers’ enthusiasm for their faith, repeatedly pressured and tempted Sister Ani to give up her vow of chastity and marry. To avoid being caught, Sister Ani moved constantly, like a guerrilla fighter, changing her hiding place every day. What needs to be acknowledged and celebrated is the fact that even in such difficult and dangerous times, she took on the responsibility of shepherding the believers. Sister Ani used her spare time to secretly teach catechism to her family and neighbors. Fearing denunciation, her catechism classes were held one-on-one, behind closed doors, in whispers. When a newborn needed baptism, Sister Ani became the most trusted person to perform the sacrament. Today, many middle-aged believers were baptized by Sister Ani herself.

In early 1980s, the faithful in Yanjing Church were finally able to live

out their faith life freely and openly. Since there was no resident priest, Sister Ani became the only shepherd whom the Yanjing Church could rely on. She led the faithful in establishing a temporary place of prayer, where they gathered daily to pray, and she took responsibility for all internal and external affairs of the parish. For many consecutive years, Sister Ani was often the only woman among a group of Buddhist monks at the Changdu regional CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) meetings. This became one of the proudest aspects of Yanjing Church after the restoration of religious freedom.

From 1980 to 1996, when Yanjing finally had its first Tibetan parish priest, Sister Ani, although not an ordained member of the clergy, became the trusted shepherd in the hearts of the faithful as she let a synodal church evolve from the grassroots. To this day, although the elderly nun has been deceased for many years, her profound influence on the faith continues to inspire Yanjing faithful to loyally follow God.

Sister Ani's nephew, Aduo, is now a member of the lay leadership group of Yanjing Church. He shared that, due to his limited abilities and energy, he often feels unable to better serve the church community and has considered resigning from his position. However, whenever he wants to evade responsibility, the words his aunt Sister Ani spoke on her deathbed echo in his heart: "You must give your all to the Church. No matter what happens, never abandon the Church." It is precisely the power of his aunt's example that has kept Aduo steadfast in his mission, diligently and faithfully serving Yanjing Church.

In the growth and development of Yanjing Church, there were not only female leaders like Sister Ani but also countless grandmothers (known as *Ayi* in Tibetan) and mothers who served as key figures in passing on the faith. As previously mentioned, when the faithful gathered for prayer, most of the time it was grandmothers or mothers who carried or held their children as they attended. The seeds of faith were sown in the hearts of young children through the sound of prayer chanting and conversations of faith sharing between these *Ayi* or mothers and the children. When former priest Luren Di shared his vocation experience, he repeatedly

emphasized the profound impact of his mother's faith and the witness of her faith-filled life on him. Today, women believers remain at the forefront of passing on the faith in Yanjing Church.

In recent years, a new avenue for transmitting faith has emerged: interfaith marriages with Buddhists. Many Catholic women, through their life example, have inspired their Buddhist husbands to convert to Catholicism. Though the interfaith marriage does not necessarily lead to the conversion of the Buddhist members of the family, Catholic women believers have become exemplary models of fostering inter-religious harmony. The home of a Catholic woman believer Amoli is a true example of how Buddhism and Catholicism can coexist harmoniously within one family. Amoli herself and her two sons are Catholics, though her husband who is a government official, and her two daughters-in-law are Buddhists. When discussing how to handle issues of differing faiths, she shared:

I told my two sons: "You are marrying them, so you must respect each other's beliefs. No one should demand or force the other to change their faith." My younger son's two children were baptized into the Catholic Church, while my older son's children, due to the request of their maternal grandmother's family, were raised as Buddhists. At the time, my older son was a bit troubled. I advised him: "If they want the children to be Buddhists, let it be; don't let this issue cause family disharmony. Besides, when the children grow up, they can still choose the religion they want to follow."

In her relationship with her Buddhist daughters-in-law, Amoli did not act with a narrow-minded attitude by rejecting or forcing them to convert. Instead, she embodied Christ's all-embracing love, acting as an open-minded, wise, and farsighted mother-in-law who understood when to compromise. She recognized that love is the most important factor, and that conversion of faith must be rooted in love. This ordinary Tibetan mother demonstrated through her actions the Church's guidance on interreligious dialogue: "An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions. . . . This dialogue is . . . a matter of 'being open to them, sharing their joys and

sorrows” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 250).

In the present-day Yanjing Church, although there are no female leaders like Sister Ani, one of the key figures in the community is still an extraordinary woman: Sister Magdalena, the church caretaker. She has remained unmarried, dedicating herself fully to Yanjing Church for over twenty years. From preparing liturgies to leading daily prayers, from cleaning and decorating the church to cultivating vegetables and grapes, from ringing the bell to remind believers to gather, to welcoming tourists and pilgrims—every aspect of Yanjing Church’s life, from its grounds to its people, is cared for and nurtured by her. Although her formal education is limited and her Mandarin is not fluent, her simplicity, piety, and quiet dedication have earned her the reputation of being a “saint” in the hearts of local believers and pilgrims alike.

Conclusion

In many parts of the world and even in some church communities, women continue to face obstacles in accessing equal opportunities to serve, minister, and exercise leadership. This ongoing struggle represents a form of limitation but also an invitation into what might be called a “synodal third space”—a space that exists at the margins of formal recognition, yet is rich with potential for dialogue, discernment, and transformation. In this third space, women are not passive observers but active participants in the church’s synodal journey, as it has been shown in the life and work of Yanjing women believers. They contribute insights, foster communion, and embody the church’s mission in ways that transcend official structures.

In today’s world, while women in these contexts may seem confined to informal or partially acknowledged roles, their presence and contributions cultivate a pilgrimage of hope. Through exercising God-given gifts and talents in ministries, catechesis, pastoral care, and social engagement, they have shown the world and the church that they are co-creators of the church’s future. The third space thus becomes a place of graced innovation, where the boundaries of institutional recognition are

expanded. By embracing the third space as a locus of discernment and co-creation, the church can appreciate women as agents of renewal, bringing new perspectives, creative energies, and prophetic courage into the ongoing synodal journey. Thus, the third space is both a challenge and a promise: a liminal space where women's voices are shaping the church's path, and where the church itself learns to listen, adapt, grow, and walk with all people of God in the spirit of synodality.

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8. Women Creating a “Synodal Third Space” by Educating Seminarians on Synodality

Christine Burke

EWA as a Synodal Third Space: Language Changes and Develops

To explain my hopes around synodality: I was a novice at the time of Vatican II. I was privileged to be given a chance to study theology when I was in my thirties, and then to work for almost twenty years in an archdiocese committed to putting the priority of baptism and its implications for faith and church leadership into practice. This means I approach the possibilities indicated by the synod with some passion, as the hopes of those days find a new vehicle.

My background has been in adult faith education, working throughout the late 1970s and 1980s in an adult faith education team for the Archdiocese of Adelaide in Australia. It was a team of men and women, ordained and lay, committed to fostering a sense of the church as the “people of God.” We reviewed our lives and mission together, wrote handbooks for parishes, consciously worked to be a team. From the mid-eighties onwards, our archdiocese also had a leadership team: the archbishop, a priest, a religious sister and a laywoman—also committed to team collaboration, working from an articulated vision of a church based on baptismal equality, reviewing their outreach to the parishes, and planning together for the next steps to achieve this vision. So, at many levels, leadership was shared and leadership as service was honoured.

Some years later, I was asked to provide leadership formation for laywomen being asked to take on leadership roles in their parishes—the result of diminishing numbers of vocations to the priesthood and religious

life. So in many ways synodality was in my blood stream before I used the word. However, this deep engagement in the process also means I am aware of the vulnerability that accompanies new moves in a church mired in clericalism. Those like me who have been on the road for a long time know the disillusion that comes when a new parish priest or bishop eliminates emerging possibilities. Many who had found ways of linking their faith to active mission walk away when they experience a return to clericalism.

“Ecclesia of Women in Asia as a synodal third space” is putting new language around an attitude that has animated the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) since we began in Bangkok so many years ago—without knowing the term “third space.” I was welcomed—although “Australia” rather stretches the term “Asia.” EWA emerged because women in Asia realized that they needed a place to theologize, to hear each other into speech. At that first meeting, we agreed that a better theology would emerge if pastoral practitioners and theology lecturers actually talked with one another. Allowing ourselves to hold differences in tension, avoiding dualism and polarization, recognizing local cultures and creativity while not downplaying the impact of colonialism, EWA became a place of honest sharing. These ideals go to our roots. I situate this chapter based on experience rather than theory and hope it can find a place in this “third space.”

Synodality is a term that captures my earlier hopes in a new way. Synodality describes the style of being church which was articulated at Vatican II and draws on the early history of the church. Under Pope Francis, church officials have begun a process which calls all Catholics to rediscover the essence of the Christian vocation. It is hoped this stress on baptism as the greatest sacrament will enable Vatican II to again give direction to the mission God entrusts to all of us.

At the heart of this synodal call is a challenge *to listen* to other perspectives, *to explore roles* within the Christian community so that all can participate, and *to reorient our preoccupation* from caring for (or protecting) the church institution to reaching out in care towards our

broken world. It is reported that Cardinal Bergolio, in an intervention before he was elected pope, said that Jesus is knocking at the door of the church and trying to get out! This theme continued throughout his term in office. In the words of Pope Francis: “Have we been stuck all too long, nestled inside a conventional, external, and formal religiosity that no longer warms our hearts and changes our lives?”¹ In other words, as he noted then and often since, we, as church, have become too self-referential.

Bringing “Synodality” to a Seminary Context

This chapter draws on my experience in recent years. I was missioned by my congregation to the Philippines at age 71 to support in the formation of our younger members who were there for formation and further study. Twelve years later, I am still here, very aware of the privilege it is to be in another culture and to live in an inter-cultural community.

When I came to Manila, I knew I had to find a place where I could make some contribution to the wider church. After asking a few times if the men at a nearby seminary had been given any exposure to feminist theology, I was invited to teach an optional course *Listening to the Voices of Women*, from 2015 to 2017. Some years later I was approached to teach Ecclesiology II—which was subtitled *Ministry*. In 2022 and again from 2023 to 2025, I have taught both Ecclesiology I and Ministry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ecclesiology II was offered online. I can categorically state that trying to teach thirty men you have never met face-to-face is not conducive to what I call good education! But in 2023 when ordinary classes resumed, I retitled the Ministry course: *Ministry in a Synodal Church*. These twenty or so students were third year seminarians, but synodality was certainly not a well-worn concept for them. A few had some small experience through working with enlightened parish priests;

¹ Philip Pulella, “Pope Decries Church Conservatives Encased in ‘Suit of Armour,’” *Yahoo News*, January 6, 2022, news.yahoo.com/pope-decries-church-conservatives-encased-121132620.html.

most had heard references to it but had not had much exposure to what it might ask of them in ministry.

These Ministry students had taken Ecclesiology I (taught by someone else), which was, naturally enough, a study of the theological basis of church. An interesting dialogue took place when the relevant person approached me to teach the first ministry course. I asked him what they had covered in Ecclesiology I: what did I have to build on? He said, “Oh the main emphasis of Ministry (Ecclesiology II) course is the development of the roles of deacons, priests, and bishops.” I responded that that was hardly wide enough in a synodal church and was given the warning that synodality will not work in this country because “in the Philippines people will always do what the priest says” (one might think experiences of the church in Ireland and Poland would put paid to that hope!). However, he was happy that I teach it in whatever way I thought was needed, so synodality became a key reference point in our course. At the same time, for me, brushing up on the development of ordained ministry over the centuries put the church’s fixation on celibacy and monarchical structures into high relief, which in itself provided interesting background to the work that students needed to do to understand the significance of synodality today.

Student Background

These courses involved students from many Asian countries. Perhaps a third of the students were from the Philippines, but the courses also included significant numbers of students from Vietnam and various countries in Africa and a few from Myanmar and Indonesia. With the invitation to teach Ecclesiology I in August 2023, I was now faced the challenge of instilling the basics of ecclesiology with a synodal orientation in a smaller group of about twenty mainly Vietnamese and Filipino students, (this first group was composed of those who had managed to reach Philippines before the COVID disruption), with a few extra students from Myanmar, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. Later larger classes included

students from Congo, Cameroon, and mainland China.² Students were from various congregations, most preparing for priestly ministry. All were male, except last semester I had one young Indonesian sister in the class. As I look back, the various groups tend to merge in my memory, so this chapter draws the combined experience of five different courses in either Ministry or Ecclesiology.

For every student, English was a second, third, or fourth language. I had to respect that. Recommending books or long articles would not achieve much. Videos worked quite well and having a PowerPoint with captions as a guide to what I was saying, and which I could put online for them afterwards, meant that they could follow more easily, despite my accent, and they could also review via the PPT. All these students are from countries which have been colonized by Europeans, for the benefit of Europeans. In so many areas, the impact of this has been devastating. We celebrated five hundred years of Catholicism in the Philippines, but it was introduced along with Western culture, at great cost to the local peoples—costs which continue to bedevil this country and the countries of other participants.

In most Asian countries, the culture and even more so the church is patriarchal, and for the most part, this patriarchy is yet to be challenged. For varied reasons, in most Asian and African countries sexual abuse has not been “outed” by any independent inquiry, so it remains known but not dealt with. This contrasts very strongly with Australia, where a government inquiry has forced the Catholic Church to face the reality and the shame and seek ways to rebuild the very fragile trust that survives. In Asia and Africa, the power of the priestly caste is relatively unchallenged. I am from Australia, but my ethnicity is European. I am female. I knew that both of these distinguishing marks can make it difficult to win the confidence of young men from other cultures. Luckily, I am also old! My

² In this I was greatly assisted by Fr. Richard Lennan, an Australian theologian who is head of ecclesiology at Boston College. He generously sent me his full reading list and guidelines to his course there.

age probably saved me, because both Asian and African traditions have respect for age.

The Synodal Process

Many will know the diagrams which outline the progress and process of the synod.³ The entire church was summoned. Parishes and dioceses were commissioned to gather responses and forward these to the central Synod office. How this was done varied greatly. (I know one parish where no parish meeting was called, but the clergy—perhaps assisted by a few laity—answered what they thought the people would say.) Nonetheless, many areas did gather small groups together and seek to hear what they thought the Holy Spirit was calling us, as church, to do today. By early 2022, the collected diocesan responses from every corner of the globe had arrived in Rome, where the Synod office faced the huge task of preparing this material for the next step. In October 2022, a group of theologians and facilitators met in Frascati, Italy, and distilled these responses down into the continental reports and drafted “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.”⁴ Continental groups of bishops and lay people met to read through, reflect on, and respond to the collation from their particular area. One can imagine that there were significant differences across continents, especially across Asia and the Pacific. But there were also common concerns which emerged from every continent and every country. The Vatican office on synodality had also prepared leaders who could facilitate mixed groups of laity and clergy, using the basic method of conversation in the Spirit. One response from many was surprise: the material had not been “vetted,” and significant areas of discontent had been voiced and recorded.

But in the classroom, for most of the students, the concept of synodality had not impacted their understanding of their mission as future

³ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, no. 3, synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

⁴ General Secretariat of the Synod, “‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent’ (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage, October 2022, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf.

priests. In late 2023, a Filipino priest reported that at a retreat for priests earlier that year, synodality was only mentioned in one comment with the assertion that it would cause problems! So, it is little wonder seminarians had had little exposure.

The first task was to situate their experience, so I asked each student to tell the class about a burning issue in their country. Those from Myanmar, Vietnam, and places like the Congo were alert to their often violent and painful realities. Some from the Philippines were more generalized, because they take for granted the widespread acceptance of Christianity, as if all people are entitled to practice so openly. Many did recognize the dehumanizing poverty and the widespread extra-judicial killings. This quick overview provided a backdrop for them to understand each other a little more and realize there will be significant differences in how they can implement synodality. Students assert that conversation about real issues does not necessarily loom large in most classes. Admittedly, they come from different congregations and do not know each other well. Often, they get over this fact by using the generic form of address “brother.” I do not think that addressing students via titles is good preparation for them approaching others as equals or seeing their role as one of service. I decided that I would follow an Australian custom of using Christian names, without any handles on them. I have done this in a few courses and found them responsive to such a personal address.

Content

In both Ecclesiology and Ministry, the beginning point is the Gospels and early church, and of course the building blocks are from Vatican II. Most women theologians have been exposed to feminist readings of the early period of emerging Christian communities for over forty years, drawing on the classic explorations of theologians like Elizabeth Johnson, Sandra Schneiders, and Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. Most seminarians had not even heard of feminist scripture scholars, let alone been exposed to their readings of Gospel scenarios and Pauline possibilities. I think this reflects lecturers who maintain a deep suspicion of women, suggesting that where

a person stands has an influence on what they see! It was good to hear Timothy Radcliffe note at the beginning of his retreat to the synod: “I am white, I am a male, from a country that benefitted from colonization, and maybe that disqualifies me before I start.”⁵ One way around this was for me to begin each class with a scripture reading, often the Gospel of the day, lead them to become still, and then raise an alternative view of that passage if it was appropriate. One said in his evaluation: “I have learned a different way of opening a session.”

Mary Magdalene as an apostle took on new possibilities for them—and I think, seriously, most had seen her as a repentant prostitute till they watched Elizabeth Johnson’s talk on Mary Magdalene. The possibility that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus might have been a husband and wife team (after all, Mary the wife of Clopas had stood at the foot of the cross . . . would he have set off home with someone else when his wife had been through such a traumatic experience?) had not dawned on most male scholars, and artwork over the ages has reinforced the likelihood that the two disciples will be seen as males.

Perhaps one of the strongest learnings I have taken from this opportunity to teach Ecclesiology I and II is that for many younger people, if an event did not happen in their country or in their lifetime, a lot of effort is needed to bring it to life! So much of the history of the Catholic Church is Europe-centered. For young people growing up in Asia, ordinary historical markers (Vatican I, World Wars—even more so the French Revolution or the Enlightenment era) ring few if any bells, although their countries have borne the impact of these forces on the church. Even more recent events, like the EDSA revolution here in the Philippines, are easily forgotten—as voting patterns have shown. When it comes to Vatican II, the 1950s is a foreign country! Very few can imagine a church where Catholics were forbidden to enter non-Catholic churches and where all masses were in Latin, and mortal sin and hell were the focus

⁵ Timothy Peter Joseph Radcliffe, “Synod Retreat Meditation: ‘Hoping Against Hope,” *Vatican News*, October 4, 2023, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-10/retreat-day-1-radcliffe-first-meditation.html.

of so many missions and retreats. To introduce them to the newness of Vatican II requires both a big overview and attention to details.

When it comes to looking at the development of official ministries through the ages, what stood out for me was the distorting imbalance of the increasing stress on celibacy, from roughly 500 CE, when monastic clergy came to be seen as the ideal disciples and missionaries. It helped me see what a huge task is ahead of us. For fifteen hundred years we have drummed into people the higher importance of celibate life, thereby limiting the self-worth and mission possibilities of the 99 percent who choose otherwise. Just think about “vocation”: we have limited this word, failing to affirm the high vocations of parenting and other forms of service to others. The outstanding figures of holiness are Popes, bishops, priests and religious.⁶ Overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly celibate, and now we say *all* are called to holiness? How do we support this 180-degree turn around?

Building a sense of the value of ordinary life and the mission embedded in living that life in response to Christ’s call will take time. Many think that ministry and mission must involve liturgical or other in-church responsibilities. The lady who sweeps our street does something to build up the reign of God by her friendliness as well as her efforts to ensure that we do not feel we live in a rubbish dump. How do we help her see that her role is already one of service? How do we help others recognize her gift to the well-being of the community? As a church we are much better at publicly recognizing religious sisters, or doctors and lawyers, than building up the “little ones” whom Jesus saw as ones who will enter the feast! In the Philippines, this is shown often in those parish gatherings where the sisters and priests are served at a different table, while outside, the ones who have done all the preparation mingle holding a cardboard container of food.

For the students, I think the most challenging aspect of an historical overview of the development of early church was seeing the slow development

⁶ “Saints by numbers . . .,” *Questions from a Ewe*, April 19, 2014, questionsfromaewe.blogspot.com/2014/04/saint-by-numbers.html.

of any ministry labelled “priestly.” Presenting the possible presence of women at the Last Supper and suggesting that this was not an ordination ceremony was also confronting, as was the assertion that household tables and not altars were the normal place for Eucharist for the first centuries. The leaders of household churches, if one listens to St. Paul, were often women.

The emphasis on institutional ministries rather than charismatic ones is an issue named in the final document from the first session of the current synod.⁷ I do not necessarily mean “Pentecostal” charismatic, but every religious congregation has the sense that the spirit of their founder contains a gift for the church. Many founders challenged institutional church perceptions of mission and holiness. Mary Ward, who founded my congregation four hundred years ago, suffered for advocating active ministries for women religious. In 1617, she gave a talk to younger women in her group. A priest had said they would be unable to persevere in apostolic work because they are “but women.” Her response still speaks to us today: “In what way are women so inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man?”⁸ Her congregation was suppressed, the women turned out into the midst of the Thirty Years War in Europe, and Mary was condemned and imprisoned by church authorities. The Bull of Suppression, from Pope Urban VIII in 1631, announced that her vision of women in apostolic work was “most unsuited to their weak sex and character, to female modesty and particularly to maidenly reserve . . . and because they have in fact grown . . . we totally and completely suppress and extinguish them, subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely from the Holy Church of God.”⁹

⁷ Synod of Bishops, “XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops First Session (4–29 October 2023) Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” October 28, 2023, no. 10.e, synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

⁸ Ursula Dirmeier, CJ, ed., *Mary Ward und ihre Grundung* (Aschendorff, 2007), 359.

⁹ Urban VIII, *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, quoted in Mary Wright, *Mary Ward's Institute: The Search for Identity* (Crossing Press, 1998), 190–193.

Mary Ward died in 1645; after such a strong condemnation, it was not until 1909 that the ban on claiming her as our founder was removed by Pope Pius X. While many founders did not endure her fate, most saw a need that was not being attended to and “found ways.” Most ministry with people at the edges of society has been done by those from the non-institutional sector of the church. Think of those who work for education, health, justice, and the environment, against trafficking, as journalists against corruption etc. The non-ordained take the lead in the ministry beyond church walls. Even at Vatican II, the contribution of religious congregations to the real work of church was almost completely ignored. The importance of laity was recognised when the focus of church was moved to the “people of God,” but even when the awareness of “serious error of the split between faith and life” was named, the mission of ordinary folks was not greatly unpacked.¹⁰

In exploring the Vatican II roots of synodality, even these students noticed that the issue of the exclusion of women from most ministries in the church was not mentioned. Contrast this with today! This helped build an awareness of how context impacts our understanding of our faith. From all continents, this synod has called for a re-thinking, a balance—only by recognizing the gifts of women and lay men, in official religious congregations or in married or single states, will the church be able to move forward. The sense that “we are the church” has a long way to go before it is front and center of our thinking. We as baptized can also foster this dualism by talking about “the church” in a way that separates ourselves from the criticism. We are all responsible! We have to move from limiting our understanding of “church” to institution rather than community.

From 2023 onwards, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”¹¹ was accessible as a reference point, alongside the document on the theology of

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43.

¹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.”

synodality.¹² Talks by Pope Francis against clericalism were a great resource—although I do not think he has realized he is saying much the same as women theologians have said for forty years: we call it patriarchy, he calls it clericalism, but at least his words are strong!

There are many wonderful videos which show the engagement of laity in this synodal movement. Listening to world-respected theologians like Massimo Faggioli, Raphael Luciani, Nathalie Becquart, and Elissa Roper; key ordained theologians like Ormond Rush, Richard Lennan, Thomas O’Loughlin; and bishops like Card. Ambo David, Vincent Long, and Shane McKinley shows this is not a fringe movement! I think some students found it amazing that five hundred-plus laity were online listening to talks and gaining new insights while they sat at theology schools in ignorance. This was a good launching point for suggesting to them that they need to keep learning or they will quickly fall behind in their understanding of where the Holy Spirit is leading us. I was able to draw from websites from Australia, Scotland, and the USA, where many laity have voted with their feet and left the church, so those who remain are committed. It is very different in Vietnam and Myanmar, where there are restrictions on webinars and a culture that does not encourage equality, as well as the more pressing pressures of grinding poverty and fear of government or military. The Philippines could do a lot more in this line, but I fear not much effort has gone into webinars that raise critical questions. The accepted preference here for liturgical and devotional practices increases the emphasis on priestly importance. Both culture (respect, don’t question) and the lack of demarcation between religion and society tend to mean that parish Facebook sites encourage “Father you are wonderful!” type responses rather than a critical exploration of ideas.

¹² International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

Raising the Difficult Issues

I found most students, when given the opportunity to talk of their experience, have seen ‘little kings’ in operation in their parishes or dioceses. One Vietnamese student said: “I always knew I did not want to be a little king, but this is the first time anyone has talked about another way to approach the role of priest.” I think the fact they themselves named the problems of patriarchal and clerical leaders (little kings) made it much easier to discuss alternative ways of leadership without sounding like I was against the priesthood! In fact, working with these young men was a call to conversion for me: as a woman in a women’s congregation, it is easy to allow criticism of the structure to become dismissive of those who are part of that structure. Their responses constantly called me to great care and service of them. Another said: “By first discussing the original sense of what priesthood is, service, I became aware of what we are and we are supposed to do. The tendency for many priests today is to be drowned by power and authority, forgetting that their call is for them to serve.”

It was a grace that the Ecclesiology I class in 2023 took place at the very time the synod session was meeting in Rome. I was able to get them in small groups to look seriously at the *Instrumentum Laboris* and address some issues that were being discussed in Rome: clericalism, women’s roles, LGBTQ+, regional differences.¹³ This enabled them to hear varying points of view but also gave opportunities for minimal “conversations in the Spirit.” I think it is without a doubt that the LGBTQ and women in ministry issues were most confronting. In the Philippines, the existence of LGBTQ people is accepted, although, I notice, they are sometimes made the butt of jokes. However, the African approach is different: a *sotto voce* comment “at home we burn or imprison them” summed it up. Attitudes are totally divided on that issue: local culture rather than the Gospel is seen

¹³ See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html, B1.2, B2.3, B3.1.

as the first reference point, and that needs to be challenged in a way that does not presume that either side has all the answers.

When the possibility of women deacons or any form of ordained ministry for women was raised, even as cautiously as in the post-synod chapter, fears emerged. “People won’t accept it,” “If we change something like that, everything will be up for grabs,” “We have to go slowly or we will lose people.” I think those from Vietnam and the Philippines, who are used to cultural Catholicism, were sobered when I told them that out of my fourteen nieces and nephews, none go to church! They are committed to justice, are great parents and family members, but they do not attend church. Their children are growing up without any lived experience of a faith community, apart from the family. The church has already lost so many people.

In an early class on feminist theological voices, one Filipino student said up front at the beginning of the course: “Well, if women are ordained, I will leave the priesthood, because it would be downgrading the priesthood.” I was much moved when at the end of that course he came to me and said: “I was wrong, wasn’t I? It would not downgrade the priesthood!”

While those issues can easily become discussion starters, the theological base of synodality in the mystery and relationality of the Trinity was also a theme that many found stimulating. The oneness of the relationship and communion in the Trinity and yet the clear distinction between the three, and the recognition that we are being called into the life of God through this process of deepening our relationship with God and with each other, I hope encouraged students to grasp a little of the deeper journey into which we are being invited.

Student Responses to the Notion of Synodality

I think that overview gives a sense of what I was attempting to teach. To turn to student responses to a way of teaching which calls them to think and to think seriously about the people they are there to serve. A number appreciated that “Everything that has been discussed . . . are real things and not just theories.” A number mentioned that having small group

discussions allowed them to hear different points of view and grow in being able to listen. One appreciated the openness to be able to speak without being judged: “My personal experiences with the church are not invalidated.” Another said: “a great opportunity for us to see the church’s true state, especially when it is going through many trials.”

Yet this open discussion of the failures of the church was challenging—in societies that do not openly raise questions, especially challenging church practices, I think it took time for some to feel free: “Sometimes, I feel bad, learning negative things about what is happening in the local churches. These feelings allow me to realize that I am part of the bigger church, not just as baptized but as a participant. I am a participant in the history of the church.”

As I mentioned above, I think for most of the students, this course was their introduction to synodality. Their responses include: “Synodality rewired my thinking about how important everyone is in the light of doing mission, participation, and community. The importance of openness to the goodness of one another . . .”; “This course helped me a lot widen my understanding and knowledge about leadership in the church, which is service and not kingship.”

A number mentioned appreciating respectful listening, silence to reflect, and also the grounding of their ministry in the life and action of Jesus: “By staying feet flat on the ground, as Christ did, our ministry can be a good way to make the face of Christ shine in the world today. Hence, I must admit that my greatest learning in this class is to always ask this question when faced by issues and concerns. What would Christ do if he is faced with such issue?” Another said: “This course is helpful for me in my journey as a future missionary and leader, to not consider myself superior in the community or the one to make decisions; it helps me to be humble by the example of Christ and be the servant of the community. In my leadership, I have to listen to others and make decisions together; this is the objective of the synodal church.” In some ways the class became a “third space”—where ideas could be explored and actions considered.

I think the course gave students the opportunity to think through existing attitudes and think into both possibilities and pitfalls in their future ministry. This is evident in their observations: “Before this course, I had almost no factual knowledge of synodality or what could be done concretely when we talk about a synodal church. As a seminarian and future priest, I started with the fear of losing authority among the parishioners. My conviction was that after the synodal journey, the priesthood will be deprived of its meaning and value. However, during the course, I was able to let away my fears and understand that the synodal church will always care for the priests and all other lay faithful as children of God.” Another one: “Through this course, God was leading me to an examination of conscience on how to be more practical when it comes to witnessing my being Christian or pastoral leader. God is also leading me to an evaluation of my mission as human being and a Christian (not just as a priest); “This subject taught me that church has its obligation to listen attentively with the heart to those people who are marginalized, not listened to, somewhat outcasts to the Church. As a seminarian undergoing formation of becoming a pastor to a flock in the future, I am asking myself now of what kind of priest I will become?”

An African student recognized his change with regard to women: “This subject has helped me to learn and unlearn a lot of things It took me time to adjust my understanding of these new perspectives of the church, especially the participation of women in the activities of the church. This is because, in my culture, women are considered inferior to men and so, unworthy to render public service to the church. However, at the end of this course, I can say that this journey made me a new person and gave me new eyes, especially concerning women’s participation in different church activities.” Another student said: “Welcoming the preaching of the non-ordained in a church that is to be Synodal will be a great achievement in the church.”

What can be drawn from this about seminar formation? One student pointed out that the senior student always gets the best room! He was explaining that they are oriented towards clericalism in many hidden ways:

the importance of being at the top of the tree. I think serious and facilitated “conversations in the Spirit” involving all those involved in priestly formation—teachers, formators, and students, as well as parishioners both male and female, would produce some interesting ideas about what could change. The Boston College project on diocesan seminary formation could be a required background reading!¹⁴ But clearly more women are needed as lecturers, so that the medium becomes part of the message. I think women are also much freer in addressing issues around homosexuality, and can avoid the “don’t ask, don’t tell” hypocrisy which riddles so much of the discussion.

What is All This Saying to Us as EWA?

Since EWA is a collective of women who are committed to realizing a vision of the church as a community of equals, I am convinced that members of EWA can play a proactive role to facilitate this change. An important area in this regard is clergy formation, and for this we need to take whatever opportunities present themselves to help shape the attitudes of young men aspiring to priesthood. These men are crucial to the possibility of change. The synod final paper stressed that seminary formation needs to be rethought, and that women need to be involved in the selection processes.¹⁵ That means, I hope, that such institutions will be calling for greater involvement of women. My years of frustration with church urged me to back off from teaching would-be priests and concentrate on classes with young women in another institution. However, the actual teaching experience has led to my conversion, because

¹⁴ Boston College Seminar on Priesthood and Ministry for the Contemporary Church, “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry,” *Origins* 48, no. 31 (2018), bc.edu/content/dam/bc1/schools/stm/about/BCPriesthooddocument-Origins-27Dec2018.pdf.

¹⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document,” synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

one feels the value of having some small influence on those who will be in positions to encourage change in others.

We are among the few women in Asia who have had opportunities to study theology. EWA has focussed on connecting theology and real life. Pope Francis is calling for this, and I do not think many men lecturing in theology know how to do it. So, if an opportunity arises, grasp it! Alongside seminary education is the need for education of people in the pews. My main ministry in Australia was in adult faith formation. Without doubt, the groundswell of lay interest in the synod comes from those who want their children or grandchildren to have a church to belong to. I think whichever group we work with, the life and teaching of Jesus must be our focus, because in my experience, from that common base conversion can happen. To start with hot-button issues means losing half the audience, because of already existing polarization.

Secondly, I think we should be advocating for seminary education in facilitation. Trainee priests spend months learning the movements needed to celebrate Eucharist. As far as I know, there is no semester-long course on facilitating small groups, on ways to encourage participation, on simple steps to appreciate the contribution of others. Surely this is an essential in a synodal church. Along with learning how to enable discernment in groups, I think we should be calling for this as a critical in seminary formation.

The third take away for me is that if one can enlist the Holy Spirit as a “guard on one’s lips” (the psalmist says something like that), the very fact that a woman is teaching is in itself facilitating change. I knew I would lose them if I alienated them, so I was glad one said, “There wasn’t the priest bashing I feared might happen.” If we come on too strongly, I think they cancel what they are hearing, but change happened in me when I saw they were ready to grow: not all of them, but most showed a readiness to change, and I think the fact it was a woman teaching them was very significant. I had to avoid “sniping,” and that was salutary for me! I had to become more synodal! I had to let go of some of my anger to be alongside them. I wanted to help them be better leaders of their communities, so while I kept

insisting on honest evaluation of how the church has failed, I found myself supporting them towards a “best practice.” I think for many this also involves helping them to see that critical thinking is not disloyalty. One can question positions, theories, people—even older people—without denigrating. This is rather un-Asian, but it is required if change is to happen.

A fourth thing for us as women theologians is that we are the change. I often explain that fifty years ago, I could not get a theology degree in a Catholic institution in Australia. Catholic theology was only taught in seminaries, where I was disqualified from participation. We cannot underestimate the change that has happened where now so many theology students are lay and many are women. Women who have forged their way as theologians and striven for equal place in theological societies know that this is never handed on a plate. An unrecognized fact for many in the institutional church is that women and lay men studying theology usually do so later in life, at their own cost, alongside real life demands of family, work and community, without the many services (and servants) that remove the lives of seminarians from the ordinary. Many religious, and many married and single people, continue their engagement with learning well beyond the first degree.

The synod report noted the under-engagement of priests and bishops in the process of synodality so far. They are going to be struggling to catch up. Are there points of intervention where we can offer to assist in parish meetings and such places, in the hope that priests will pick up some understanding on the side? Sometimes I think we are not going to be invited unless we offer and offer again!

Finally, what can we do to expand the conversation? I would love to see EWA begin a mini-series of lectures, where Asian women talk about these things. Can we call on some of Asian and Indian women who were at the synod, to share their perspectives, experiences? This would probably need careful choice and good preparatory questions, as I do not know the orientation of many who were there, but those I do know have a lot to offer and by speaking out of these many cultures could raise possibilities more directly than I can.

All this being said, there is another critical way we as EWA women can contribute to synodality: recognizing the current ministry of women as everyday members of the church community. Most Catholic women are not going to study theology or take up front roles in institutional church life. However, almost every mother helps her child see the world through eyes of wonder, encourages children to forgive each other and her husband to actually listen to the children, ensures that important days are remembered and celebrated in small yet meaningful ways, is aware of the needs of neighbours. These are ways of building community, encouraging participation, and are actually core to mission of Christians in our world. If we could start writing, speaking about these ordinary actions as central to a synodal sense of mission, we could help change a mindset which often fails to recognize the reality that Christians have to preach always and occasionally use words! As women who have had the opportunities of further education in theology and pastoral outreach, we can build up among all the baptized the awareness that mission is not restricted to in-church activities, but happens by them going about their daily life and being Christ for others. That is the message that transforms.

Conclusion

This article has shared the experience of one woman, attempting to expand the boundaries of some young men who are preparing for leadership in the church. By indicating the content of such an approach and the responses, I hope that others may be encouraged to step forward and offer their support in local settings. Priests are key figures in the process of changing church culture. They are essential if this this call to conversion is to succeed. But we are also another key: we need to speak up and find ways of changing the culture.

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2011. She currently lives in a community of sisters from South Korea, Myanmar, and Timor Leste. She has published a book imagining the contexts in which the stories of Jesus were passed on in the early church, and two books on Mary Ward, the founder of the CJ/IBVM (Loreto) congregations. Her doctorate, completed in 1995, asked how the Catholic social justice tradition might gain a more credible voice in secular society.

Part 3

Synodal Church Beyond Ecclesial Spaces

9. Self, Culture, and Synodality: Listening to Women’s Voices in the Third Space

Marinda Keng Fan Chan

Grief, a universal experience for humans, is the “anguish experienced after significant loss. . . . Grief may also assume the form of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself.”¹ The loss of a loved one during the devastating pandemic of COVID-19 certainly added weight to the grief and bereavement. The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented and global public health event, disrupted the normal process of grief.² Studies have shown that sudden, unexpected, and traumatic loss can aggravate stronger stress, more complications and difficulties in recovering from the natural causes under normal circumstances.³ The bereaved family or individual faces not only the physical separation of the loved one but, as American psychologist Froma Walsh mentions, “the loss of physical contact with family members and social networks; the loss of jobs, financial security, and livelihoods; the loss of pre-crisis ways of life and threatened loss of hopes and dreams for the future; and the loss of a sense of normalcy in the shattered assumptions about our lives and connections with the world around us.”⁴ Studies show

¹ *American Psychology Association Dictionary of Psychology* (2007), s.v. “Grief.”

² Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, “Bereavement in Times of COVID-19: A Review and Theoretical Framework,” *Omega* 82, no. 3 (2021): 500–522, doi.org/10.1177/0030222820966928.

³ Raphael Beverley, Nada Martinek, and Sally Wooding, “Assessing Traumatic Bereavement,” in *Assessing Psychological Trauma and PTSD*, ed. J.P. Wilson and T.M. Keane (Guildford Press, 2004), 492–510.

⁴ Froma Walsh, “Loss and Resilience in the Time of COVID-19: Meaning Making, Hope, and Transcendence,” *Family Process* 59, no. 23 (2020): 898–911, doi.org/10.1111/famp.12588.

that the physical act of cultural rites and psychosocial and spiritual support can lay a foundation for bereaved individuals to cope with the loss.⁵

Women from all walks of life worldwide have encountered grief at the passing away of relatives, friends, and acquaintances during the last six years of the global pandemic. Women in Macao could not escape the reality of loss and grief as well. This study aims to investigate how women grieve the loss of a loved one.⁶ It looks at women's self-resilience, their cultural context, and particularly the way their faith community, the church, as a journeying companion, listens and is with them in their sorrow. Interviews were conducted with women who had lost their loved ones during the COVID-19 period (2020–2023), and apply a hermeneutical dialogue between Homi J. Bhabha's "third space," "synodality" of Pope Francis, and the "ritual theory" of Catherine Bell. This study starts with its methodology framework, followed by presenting the sociological data of the study. Then, it discusses the interdisciplinary perspectives on grief and loss and their correlation with the findings. The study concludes with a vision of women's faith in their "third space."

Methodology

This work employs a methodology of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to study the lived experiences of two women to gain deep insights into their loss and grief. Researchers use IPA to explore

⁵ Gianmarco Biancalani, Cladua Azzola, Raluca Sassu, Cristina Marogna, and Ines Testoni, "Spirituality for Coping with the Trauma of a Loved One's Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Italian Qualitative Study," *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 2 (2022): 173–185, doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00989-8; Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Researching Grief: Cultural, Relational, and Individual Possibilities," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 22, no. 8 (2007): 617–630, doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2017.1388347; Joanne Cacciatore, Kara Thieleman, Ruth Fretts, and Barnes Jackson Lori, "What is Good Grief Support? Exploring the Actors and Actions in Social Support After Traumatic Grief," *PLOS One* 16, no. 5 (May 2021), doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252324.

⁶ This study was retroactively reviewed by the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Macao Polytechnic University, which confirmed that the research was conducted in full compliance with the standard ethics protocol.

individuals' meaning-making related to certain significant experience.⁷ Phenomenology studies the meaning of people's lived experiences to describe the meaning of a particular experience by learning how and what an individual experiences or learns.⁸ The rationale of using a phenomenological approach is to set aside the assumptions that women in grief are the same or in a standard process; hence, this study focuses mainly on each woman's unique and immediate experience. As Larkin and Thompson claimed, the outcome of an IPA is "likely to include an element of 'giving voice' and 'making sense.'"⁹

This chapter analyzes the narratives of two Christian women in their mid-50s to 60s—one Chinese and one Filipina—from a multicultural perspective, exploring how their distinct cultural backgrounds shape their unique expressions of grief and mourning rituals. An interview guide was developed for the in-depth interview to capture the interviewees' narratives of every unique woman in our study. The interviews were conducted in December 2023, using semi-structured interviews to provide free space for women to express their experiences related to the loss of a loved one. The objective of this study was explained to the interviewees in detail, and they signed a written informed consent and permission to record the interview content. Each interview was around one to two hours at an interview site of their choice, and pseudonyms are used throughout this study. The interpretation of the interview data, guided by IPA, is conducted from a liminal perspective that consciously negotiates the space between an emic understanding of the participants' lived experience and

⁷ Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Useful Methodology for Research on the Lived Experience of Pain," *British Journal of Pain* 9, no. 1 (2015): 41–42, doi.org/0.1177/2049463714541642.

⁸ Arianne Teherani, Tina Martimianakis, Teresa Stenfors-Hayes, Anupma Wadhwa, and Lara Varpio, "Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach," *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 7, no. 4 (2015): 669–670, doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-15-00414.1.

⁹ Michael Larkin and Andrew Thompson, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*, eds. A. Thompson and D. Harper (John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 101.

an etic analytical framework.¹⁰ A transcript was created for the researcher to closely read the interview data, together with several listenings of the audio recording, so that the researcher could immerse herself to reflect the material source and seek connections between the themes emerging from the interviewees.

This study hopes to contribute a vision of an integrated approach to grief in a synodal spirit within the fields of psychology, spirituality, and ritual studies for women of all walks of life, and for those of different cultures and religions.

Internal Monologue: Voices From Self

In 2022, Regina, a Chinese woman in her early fifties and also the mother of a sixteen-year-old teenage girl, lost her father, who was close to eighty and did not have any significant sickness before the sudden death. He passed away while asleep in his favorite armchair at home. Regina was out of town for a holiday together with the families of her other two sisters. Earlier in the morning, her sister woke her up, warning that they could lose their father. Her father was sent to emergency after Regina's mother had discovered his pallid body. Regina was in shock, as she had talked to her father a day before. Regina recalled, "Aside from being shocked, I could not believe this was happening."¹¹ For Regina, the sudden news of her father's unconscious state was overwhelming, and since there was no opportunity to process her own feelings, she claims, "When all of us heard the news, we just pretended to be calm. There was a strong internal turmoil flooding inside me, and we had to wait for further news." After thirty minutes of emergency rescue, the physician declared him dead. Regina felt that those thirty minutes of waiting were torture, and the first one she thought of was the school pastor in her work. She texted the pastor, asking

¹⁰The term "emic" refers to the concepts, statements, and interactions of a researcher's interlocutors in ethnographic research, while "etic" is a term used to specify a researcher's own analytic framework. See Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "Emic and Etic," in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic.

¹¹Interview with Regina, December 27, 2023.

him to pray for her father. Regina was heartbroken as she could not be with her father in the final moments of his life.

Regina is the eldest of five siblings. Two sisters were with her on holiday in mainland China, and her two brothers were with her father in Macao. In Regina's words: "I immediately asked everybody in the hotel to come to my room, with all my young nephews and nieces. I invited them to pray together." Despite being the only Christian in her family, Regina trusted that her non-Christian sisters could understand her intention. She felt the responsibility to contain and take care of everyone in her role as an elder sister. After the collective prayer, she broke into tears. It was the first moment alone when she processed her grief. It took a day to get a ticket back to Macao, and she began to arrange a funeral for her father.

Regina's family chose a Taoist funeral rite, a common practice among Macao's Chinese community. The ceremony involves an altar furnished with food offerings, incense, and joss paper, presided over by Taoist priests and musicians who recite sutras and chants. More than just symbolic, this ritual provides comfort to the bereaved by affirming that the departed is in good hands in the afterlife. It also represents a profound philosophy of life and death.

Regina found in her grieving process that she received good support from her faith community. All the priests in her school attended her father's Taoist funeral. She received prayers from friends, and her usual church group consoled her much during the year by meeting twice a month to share daily life experiences, which helped her to live normally after the sudden death of her father. She claims that it is important for women to ask and search for help actively, particularly in bereavement. She adds, "There is a good number of resources from the church to support us, but the church might need to let the community know about their activities or service on the pro-life, theological meaning of life and death, and pastoral needs of the mourning. It truly depends on us to open our hearts to search for or willingly accept to get help. My church community sojourned with me in this period and gave me much consolation."

Maria, a Filipina migrant worker in her early sixties, has been living in Macao for forty years. She has three grown children, one working as a teacher, the other as a nurse, and the youngest is in college. Maria is a devout Catholic and very active in Filipino pastoral work in Macao. Throughout the years, she has been actively helping new and old migrant workers to settle down and live their lives in Macao. During COVID-19 in 2022, she initiated a food-raising project to support Filipinos who got laid off and trapped in Macao in the severe phase of the pandemic.

A few years before COVID started, Maria's mother in the Philippines got very sick from kidney failure and often needed hemodialysis at the hospital. Maria is the second oldest among twelve siblings. Some are migrant workers aboard, earning a living for their families. Maria regularly sent funds to the Philippines for her mother's prolonged medical treatment. Her mother had been on hemodialysis for six years, outliving her original prognosis. In February 2020, Maria received the news that her mother collapsed after her treatment at the hospital. She stayed at the hospital for one day but wanted to go home. Soon after she went back, her mother passed away. Maria was still shocked, even though she had prepared for her death all those years. Maria recalled, "I just talked to my mother the day before her collapse. My mother asked me if I needed anything from her. I replied, maybe some oil for hair."¹² Immediately, Maria bought the tickets for her whole family to go back to the Philippines for the funeral. Unfortunately, on the day of boarding, Macao had banned entry for some international flights. Maria was worried that they would not be able to come back to Macao after the funeral, so she canceled the flights. In the end, she was unable to attend the funeral in person.

Maria had a good relationship with her mother, and they used to talk every night. Maria related, "Even though I could not go back to pay respect, the live stream mass at home for nine days was very good, a good way for me to mourn my beloved mother." She reported that close to twenty Filipino friends passed away both in Macao and the Philippines

¹²Interview with Maria, December 27, 2023.

during the intensive phase of the pandemic. She complained, “It is not enough, what we have for our Filipino migrant workers here. The Filipino consulates help to arrange flights or transport the corpse back to the Philippines and help the migrant workers radically, but our pastoral center did not do much for us.” Amid helplessness during the pandemic, the migrant workers did not receive much help from the church’s pastoral center, rather some social services such as Caritas had organized various food programs, sponsorship for hospital stays, or significant help for the migrant workers. When Maria’s Macao friends and colleagues heard of the death of her mother, her faith group, the Filipino Legion of Mary, initiated an online rosary, praying for her family. As it was during the strict social distance policy, all the bereavement and rituals were online. Maria thanked those who had supported her during her process of grieving. She wished the pastoral center could take up more responsibilities to help the migrant workers in Macao, as it was difficult for someone to grieve when they could not physically be with the departed loved one.

Internal Roots: Voices Within Culture

Emerging from the interview data, two main themes stand out from our analysis: the significance of the cultural and ritualistic funeral for the dead, and the spiritual support for the griever. According to Catherine Bell, an American scholar in the study of Chinese religions and ritual studies, ritual is a cultural and historical construction.¹³ The funeral of Regina’s late father was full of cultural, ritualistic, and spiritual perspectives relating to the Taoist philosophy of life and death. One of the significant rituals in a Taoist funeral is to perform a ritual known as *Po tiyu* in Cantonese, which means *breaking the hell’s gate*. This ritual symbolizes the soul of the deceased being released from hell and going into rebirth through a series of dances.¹⁴ In this funeral ritual, a Taoist priest brings along a paper tablet of

¹³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 2009), viii.

¹⁴ Xiaoyan Ivy Wu, Margo Turnbull, Amos Yung, and Bernadette Maria Watson, “Grief and Bereavement in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 10, no. 7 (July 2022), doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.107017.

the deceased and circles in fishlike steps with a sword moving around a symbolic gate of hell, made of two paper bridges that could lead to rebirth after death. Alongside the bridge, there is a small pot of boiling oil (the hellfire at the center of the tiles), the hell gate, eggs (hell soldiers), candles, and a joss stick, and the priest uses a sword to break the hell gate (the tiles) to release the spirit into rebirth.¹⁵

Regina mentioned that the funeral rites were a definite help in her grieving process. In her own words, “The funeral rite was chosen by my mother and brother; they had prepared everything before we came back to Macao. If for me, I might not choose this kind of ritual. Even though I am the eldest among the siblings, my brother is considered the firstborn son, a traditional view for Chinese to inherit my father’s position as the head of the family. This is good for my family, and I am willing to follow their way of mourning.”

The collective family ritual gathers family, friends, and acquaintances to experience a communitarian mode of grieving, an important experience for Chinese folk religious practices. As Bell has stated, for the Chinese, incense is a connection with their ancestors on a daily basis.¹⁶ Regina mentioned that in her parents’ house, there is an ancestor altar for the family descendants to burn joss sticks to pay respect to their departed family members, and now her late father was on the altar for her children and grandchildren to remember him in a concrete way.

Aside from the communitarian grieving with a spiritual form other than her own religion as a Catholic, Regina considers going to mass a ritual to offer her grief to God. She recalled the first mass she went to after receiving the news of her father, “When I just entered the church, I burst into tears. Glancing at the crucifix at the center of the church, I wondered where the soul of my father would be. My father had worked hard and was

¹⁵ “Breaking the Hell’s Gate,” *Winde Cantonese Taoist Ritual Services*, taoistrituals.com/breaking-the-hells-gate-破地狱/.

¹⁶ Catherine Bell and Alfred Benney, “Dr. Catherine Bell Engages with the Question: How Do You Define Religion?,” DigitalCommons@Fairfield, April 15, 2002, digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/asrvideos/82.

humble in his life, and now he could rest and I have a sense of peace in my heart. I offer and entrust everything to God.” Regina’s father passed away more than a year ago. She goes often to his grave and prays the rosary for him while her other family members burn joss paper and joss sticks. This ongoing and frequent performative ritual induces connectedness with her father.

In his formative contribution to the study of culture and ritual, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) claimed that “religion is a cultural system,” and culture is “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols.”¹⁷ In the tradition of Maria’s town, they usually place the corpse at home. A priest visits the deceased’s home to celebrate mass. In Maria’s mother’s case, mass was celebrated for nine days at home. Maria claimed that family and friends gathered around to grieve in groups, rather than privately and individually. She said, “Filipinos are a close society. We often gather together for festivals, baptisms, and funerals.” Maria continued, “Even though I did not have a chance to attend my mother’s funeral, my friends in my hometown, like my high school friends, went to pay respect to my mother. They have helped me when I was not around. I was consoled by my friends paying respect to my mother physically.” While in Macao, Maria could not perform any rituals or ceremonies. She just followed the live stream of the funeral mass. It was only after three years of waiting until the travel ban was lifted that Maria could visit the Philippines to pay respects at her mother’s grave. Maria says, “We need to accept the situation as it is, not only you, just accept the fact that life is like that.”

Funeral rituals are different in religions, cultures, societies, and persons; however, the physicality of the funeral ritual provides psychological maturation, which could help the bereaved to accept and face the concrete loss, and promotes a grieving process, which could allow the bereaved

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (Basic Books, 1973), 89.

survivor to manifest their grief publicly.¹⁸ To face and accept the loss of a loved one is one of the five steps of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's grief model, which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹⁹ Furthermore, culture plays a crucial role in shaping funeral rites. As exemplified by the Taoist and Catholic funerals described by our interviewees, the symbolic aspects of these rituals are profoundly connected to each faith's distinct philosophy of life and death. The goal of a Taoist funeral is to facilitate "a peaceful transition for the departing soul," which is embedded in the cosmic principle of living in harmony with the Tao (the way).²⁰ Although every funeral rite is unique, the core of the funeral is always communitarian. As one can see from the interviewees, the presence of family, friends, and acquaintances is important to acknowledge the earthly life of the dead and the companionship of the bereaved.

Studies have shown that restricting grief rituals and funerals during COVID-19 could prolong symptoms of grief and cause complex bereavement.²¹ Mourning practices—such as crying before the corpse, bowing, and making offerings—serve as crucial liminal and communal acts. They form a non-verbal process of acceptance, which aligns with a key stage in Kübler-Ross's grief model. These rituals function as a rite of passage for both the living and the dead, a concept articulated by

¹⁸ Christiane Pantoja de Souza and Airle Miranda de Souza, "Funeral Rituals in the Process of Mourning: Meaning and Functions," *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa* 35, no. 22 (July 2019): 1–7, doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e35412.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Routledge, 1969), doi.org/10.4324/9780203010495.

²⁰ "Taoist Funerals: An Overview of Taoist Philosophy of Life and Death," *Funeral Services Singapore*, funeralservicessingapore.com.sg/taoist-funerals-an-overview-of-taoist-philosophy-of-life-and-death/.

²¹ Huibertha B. Mitima-Verloop, Trudy M. Mooren, Maria E. Kritikou, and Paul A. Boelen, "Restricted Mourning: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Funeral Services, Grief Rituals, and Prolonged Grief Symptoms," *Psychiatry* 13 (2022), doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.878818; Francesca Diolaitui, Donatella Marazziti, Maria Francesca Beatino, Federico Mucci, and Andrea Pozza, "Impact and Consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic on Complicated Grief and Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder," *Psychiatry Research* 30 (2021): doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2021.113916.

anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.²² The rite of passage includes three stages: stage of separation, marginal/liminal stage, and stage of reincorporation. In the final stage, the individual reintegrates into society with a new social role. For our interviewees, Maria and Regina, the funeral rites constituted a process of separation from their beloved parents. They now navigate the liminal stage of grief, processing their loss through ritual. Ultimately, these funeral practices are designed to facilitate their reincorporation into society with a new identity—one that must reconcile the profound absence of their mother and father. In Regina’s own words, “After my father passed away, I just feel part of me is gone, and I am not the one I used to be, but my life still needs to move on without my father, a new start now.” In this process of liminality, one learns to transform oneself.

Internal Spirituality: Voices From the Church

As women in grief, both Maria and Regina are grateful for having a faith community to support them during their loss. The notion of a *communitas* is vital in the grieving process.²³ All those who supported our interviewees in the funeral and grieving process are companions during this transit stage of their lives. A *communitas* is part of a synodal process—a new process launched by Pope Francis in 2021, reflecting the theme *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*.²⁴ The word “synod” comes from the Greek words *syn* (together) and *hodos* (way),

²² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aline Publishing, 1969); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

²³ *Communitas* is a Latin term developed by Victor Turner to indicate a society living together during a liminal period that is “relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96).

²⁴ Pope Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html).

which Francis uses to mean journeying together.²⁵ Explained in his own words, “Celebrating a Synod means walking on the same road, walking together. Let us look at Jesus. First, he encounters the rich man on the road; he then listens to his questions, and finally, he helps him discern what he must do to inherit eternal life. Encounter, listen, and discern.”²⁶

The synodal process invites Catholics from all over the world to participate in a reflection process to discover how the church can be a journeying companion. This process symbolizes an inverted pyramid, not from the top down but bottom up. Francis stresses, “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness and proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . . And you have to start from the ground up.”²⁷

Grounding the synodal process in reality necessitates a difficult examination: to what extent did our faith communities embody synodality by authentically journeying with women in sorrow during the COVID-19 crisis? From the verdicts of Regina and Maria, the faith community has been a consoling companion during their losses. Families, friends supporting with prayers, initiating praying with the rosary together online or by gathering together, and actual pastoral support are often initiated by women. Regina, even though shocked and grieved for herself, gathered her younger sisters to pray for their father. Maria’s high school friends at home in the Philippines went to the nine-day mass liturgy when they knew Maria could not go back to her mother’s funeral. Women possess an

²⁵ “The Synod of Bishops: An Introduction,” *Holy See*, vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_01011995_profile_en.html.

²⁶ Pope Francis, “Opening of the Synodal Path: Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” October 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

²⁷ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013, americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis.

extraordinary capacity to gather, listen, and accompany. In our narratives, they embody the synodal spirit—journeying together as companions to heal wounds and care for the sick in the church’s “field hospital.” Thus, they are not merely participants in the synodal process; they are actively enacting it.

Self, Culture, and Synodality

This chapter examines the intricate aspects of grief experienced by women, highlighting how the psychological, cultural, and spiritual facets are intertwined in the complex process of grieving. The unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the typical grieving process, with disruptions to funeral rituals by the lockdown policy, the enforcement of social distancing, and the overwhelming number of deaths occurring simultaneously. Beyond the pandemic, women’s grieving experiences are further shaped by their social and cultural role. These roles are often defined by cultural logics that alienate and marginalize women, silencing their grief and limiting their support networks. A traditional Chinese proverb goes, “It is a woman’s virtue to be ignorant” (女子無才便是德), while another counters, “A woman can hold up half of the heaven” (婦女能頂半邊天), illustrating both the subjugation and strength expected of women.

In Chinese culture, Confucian teachings traditionally dictate that women must be obedient to men, including fathers, husbands, and sons.²⁸ This concept of male superiority remains embedded in society today. Women are often seen as nurturers, expected to care for their families constantly, embodying the idea of “holding up half of the heaven.” Moreover, the role of Chinese mothers is heavily influenced by Confucian

²⁸ Xie Zhenming, “Regarding Men as Superior to Women: Impacts of Confucianism on Family Norms in China,” *China Population Today* 11, no. 6 (1994): 12–16.

ideals of family harmony,²⁹ where a mother's *self-identity*³⁰ is sacrificed for the family. During bereavement, women may be expected to suppress their own emotions to prioritize nurturing others. In Chinese society, family needs often take precedence over those of women. Despite the rise in women's education and increased influence within the family, traditional household roles still dominate modern life.³¹ In contemporary settings like Macao, women frequently experience a sense of fragmentation, juggling family duties, such as caring for children or elderly parents, alongside work responsibilities and community involvement.³²

A 2017 report on the status of women ranked Macao tenth globally in the gender inequality index.³³ The report highlighted that nearly 70 percent of local women hold full-time or part-time jobs, 46 percent manage family finances, and 80 percent are responsible for domestic chores. Agnes Lam, an ex-member of Macao's Legislative Assembly and an advocate for women's equality, identifies traditional ideologies as a major obstacle to gender equality. She explains that although many women in Macao have the freedom to choose their own paths, some give up their careers to conform to cultural norms that expect mothers to remain at home. She argues that this mind-set perpetuates itself over time.³⁴ Consequently, women are often caught between their family obligations

²⁹ Li Chenyang, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (2006): 583–603.

³⁰ "Self" in Jungian psychology refers to the integration of psyche, which includes conscious and unconscious part of the personality; see more in Joseph Campbell, ed., *The Portable Jung* (Penguin Books, 1972), 23–46.

³¹ Liu Jane and Marilyn Carpenter, "Trends and Issues of Women's Education in China," *The Clearing House* 78, no. 6 (2005): 277–281; Zhao Jiayi and Karen Jones, "Women and Leadership in Higher Education in China: Discourse and the Discursive Construction of Identity," *Administrative Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2017): 21, doi.org/10.3390/admsci7030021.

³² Claire E. Wolfteich, *Navigating New Terrain: Work and Women's Spiritual Lives* (Paulist Press, 1989), 129.

³³ "Women's Report Indicates Improved Gender Equality," *Macao Daily Times*, November 22, 2018, macaudailytimes.com.mo/womens-report-indicates-improved-gender-equality.html.

³⁴ Mariana César de Sá, "Founded on Inequality," *Macao News*, April 13, 2017, macaunews.mo/features/founded-on-equality/.

and professional commitments, leading to exhaustion, while cultural expectations continue to suppress their needs and voices.

In addition to the sociocultural expectations that shape women's roles, women today continue to face oppression, injustice, and the deprivation of rights and dignity. In many parts of Asia, women are still compelled to leave their homes to become migrant workers, often becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Unfortunately, migrant workers are often subjected to domestic abuse, and many find themselves over-staying their visas, leading to illegal status. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation by agents and, in some cases, forces them into prostitution.³⁵ According to data from the United Nations, before the pandemic, an alarming 243 million girls and women aged 15–19 experienced sexual and/or physical violence at the hands of intimate partners in the previous year.³⁶ Since the onset of the pandemic, violence against women, especially domestic violence, has intensified. In response, the UN launched the “Shadow Pandemic Campaign” to raise public awareness about the global surge in domestic violence during the pandemic.³⁷ Furthermore, some studies have indicated that the pandemic has disproportionately worsened the economic situation for women.³⁸ For instance, in Macao, domestic helpers—the majority of whom are women—faced job insecurity during

³⁵ BILA on Women II, “Summary of Country Reports on the Status of Women,” in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, ed. Virginia Saldanha (Claretian Publications, 2007), 105.

³⁶ “The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19,” *UN Women*, unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19.

³⁷ “The Shadow Pandemic.”

³⁸ Jade Cornnor, Sarina Madhavan, Mugdha Mokashi, Hanna Amanuel, Natasha Johnson, Lydia Pace, and Debora Bartz, “Health Risks and Outcomes that Disproportionately Affect Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review,” *Social Science & Medicine* 266, (2020): 113364, doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113364; Naila Kabeer, Shahra Razavi, and Yana van der Meulen Rogers, “Feminist Economic Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Feminist Economics* 27, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–29, doi.org/10.1080/13545701.1876906.

the lockdown. Some risked losing their jobs if they refused to remain with their employers, and many saw a reduction in wages.³⁹

Women frequently find themselves in a “third space,” a concept introduced by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha to describe the in-between space created by cultural collisions. Bhabha argues that this liminal space is a “fantastic location of cultural difference,” where new cultural identities emerge and boundaries are realigned through performative acts.⁴⁰ For many Asian women, they often navigate the daily tension of being the primary caregiver expected to manage household duties—a role ingrained by tradition—while also being an ambitious professional pursuing a demanding career. This liminal existence is a constant negotiation between filial duty and personal ambition. In the context of grief, a bereaved woman occupies this liminal “third space,” which anthropologist Victor Turner describes as “betwixt and between.” This space represents a transition between the realms of the living and the dead, placing the mourner in a position outside normative social roles. As Regina narrates, during a Taoist funeral, the first-born male traditionally takes charge of decisions. Regina, who was used to making her own decisions, found herself following the lead of her brother and mother during her father’s funeral, illustrating how this third space reshapes roles and identities.

The liminal third space allows for negotiation of roles, identities, and ways of being. As the Oxford reference explains, the third space is a “creative space” where the discourse or position of the ruling subject and the subaltern meet.⁴¹ Women, often in the role of the subaltern, must navigate this space while contending with power dynamics, whether they

³⁹ “Domestic Workers Renew Calls for Wages Protection as Their Earning Falls,” *The Macao News*, September 6, 2023, macaonews.org/news/city/macau-macao-domestic-workers-helpers-wages/; Isabelle Cockel, “I Am Sad That I Had to Try to Feed 400 Migrant Workers in Macau,” *International Institute for Asian Studies Blog*, April 21, 2023, blog.iias.asia/migrants-biographies/i-am-sad-i-had-try-feed-400-migrant-workers-macau.

⁴⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 219.

⁴¹ *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “Third Space,” oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803103943993.

are from authority figures, policymakers, or societal structures. This concept is relevant to the experience of migrant workers, such as Maria's account of Filipino workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, who lacked pastoral and practical support. Migrant workers, as a global minority, often face neglect or exploitation in terms of labor protection, living conditions, and the right to practice their faith. According to United Nations data, women make up 74 percent of domestic migrant workers globally, totaling 8.5 million, and 40 percent of countries lack national labor laws that safeguard domestic workers' rights.⁴²

Today's "field hospitals" are still filled with women facing hardship, bereavement, imprisonment—both physically and mental—and the cultural subjugation of men. In light of the synodal spirit, it is essential to explore how we can empower these diverse women, addressing their various needs, such as physical and mental wellness, spiritual companionship, and at times, even basic survival. However, it is equally important not to view women merely as vulnerable or in constant need of help. Women are actively seeking to live out the synodal spirit within their communities, and they want their feminist voices to be heard and contribute meaningfully.

The synodal process, now in its fourth phase, could serve as a "creative third space" to bring healing, empowerment, and companionship to women in various circumstances. The methodology of triangulation—encountering, listening, and discerning—can be a framework for embodying the synodal spirit. First, it is necessary to go out to the "battlefield" to seek and encounter those of who are wounded. This is a departure from a hierarchical or paternalistic approach, in line with Pope Francis's vision of an "open-door" church. As he expressed, "The Lord also opened before them [Peter and Paul] the doors of evangelization . . . so they could have

⁴² "Migrant Domestic Workers," *UN Women*, interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explain-er/migration/en/index.html.

the joy of encountering their brothers and sisters in the fledgling communities and bring the hope of the Gospel to all.”⁴³

The Church must open its doors and meet people where they are in their daily lives. The first step in synodality is *encountering* others in need and entering into dialogue with them. Pope Francis emphasized that every encounter requires openness, courage, and a willingness to be challenged by the presence and stories of others.⁴⁴ Such dialogue is not about trying to change others but about respecting and learning from their experiences. As Cardinal Robert W. McElroy has noted, “Encounter proceeds from the recognition of the grace within the life and reflections of our partners in dialogue. It seeks not to overpower or convince, but rather to discover the wisdom that lies in the heart of the other.”⁴⁵ This approach is particularly relevant to women, whose wisdom and lived experiences are profoundly valuable yet far too often overlooked. How often, in various social and cultural contexts, are women truly respected for their wisdom and dignity? Ensuring that women are not exploited or abused, that they are treated equally and respectfully, and that they have the same educational and professional opportunities as men is vital.

A mutual and authentic encounter requires the second key element of the synodal spirit, which is *listening*. Attentive listening is extremely crucial, especially to the often-overlooked voices of women in their liminal or “third space” experiences. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “True encounter arises only from listening.”⁴⁶ This form of active listening calls for an openness of heart, as Francis reflects: “Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered,

⁴³ Pope Francis, “Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul,” June 29, 2024, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20240629-omelia-pallio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20240629-omelia-pallio.html).

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, “The Homily for Opening the Synod Path,” October 10, 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html).

⁴⁵ Robert W. McElroy, “Synodality and Dialogue: Fostering a Culture of Encounter,” *Catholic News Service*, May 31, 2022, [angelusnews.com/faith/synodality-and-dialogue-fostering-a-culture-of-encounter/](https://www.angelusnews.com/faith/synodality-and-dialogue-fostering-a-culture-of-encounter/).

⁴⁶ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

rejected or judged?”⁴⁷ In every corner of the world, women’s voices, often silenced by societal and cultural expectations, are frequently ignored. Across the world, women are constrained by roles that prevent them from voicing their needs and desires. Authentic listening is thus a foundational step in cultivating the synodal spirit. In his 2016 address to the International Union of Superiors General, Pope Francis highlighted that “women see things with an originality different to that of men; and this is enriching, in consultation, and decision-making, and in practice.”⁴⁸ This recognition of women’s unique perspectives offers a powerful opportunity to unite the church. By embracing these differences, the synodal spirit can foster new and creative ideas.

Third, accompanying women in *discerning* actions can help eliminate the oppression or stereotyping they face. As Pope Francis notes, “Encountering and listening are not ends in themselves.”⁴⁹ He urges the faithful to progress in our journey by emptying ourselves, freeing ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking and outdated pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time and the direction in which he wants to lead us.⁵⁰ Discernment within a synodal community requires genuine dialogue characterized by authentic thoughts, honesty, and openness of hearts. Robert W. McElroy emphasizes that this type of honesty—forthright but not hurtful, informative but not overpowering, and communicative and not stylized—is vital for dialogue at every level, from family life to religious communities to political and governmental institutions.⁵¹ Honest dialogue necessitates that both sides set aside their stereotypes and biases, confronting their own truths. Ignatius of Loyola often encouraged retreatants to engage in self-

⁴⁷ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁴⁸ “The Role of Women in a Synodal Church—Building the Civilisation of Love,” *CatholicTT*, February 16, 2024, catholictt.org/2024/02/16/the-role-of-women-in-a-synodal-church-building-the-civilisation-of-love/.

⁴⁹ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁵⁰ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁵¹ McElroy, “Synodality and Dialogue.”

honesty during the discernment process. The female Ignatian scholar Vinita Hampton Wright reminds us to be open about our emotions, thoughts, and assumptions.⁵² Respectful encounters, active and authentic listening, and honest discernment are crucial for fostering dialogue and building unity in our world, empowering women in all aspects of life.

In Taoist philosophy, the dynamic interplay of yin and yang symbolizes a harmonious balance that emerges from difference. This serves as a powerful metaphor for the synodal spirit, which seeks to bridge dichotomies—such as clergy and laity, men and women, or hierarchy and grassroots. This spirit generates a new force of unity and companionship. Our vision, therefore, is to embody this principle through a ground-up approach that fosters genuine companionship and support for women navigating the challenges of their “third space.”

Conclusion

This study sought to voice the importance of synodality, a way of listening and journeying with each other from the ground, particularly among grieving women. This work employs a methodology including qualitative phenomenological research to study the lived experiences of two women to gain deep insights into women’s experiences of grief. Every grieving woman is not stereotypical to the same degree in bereavement. Each woman’s unique and immediate experience is her lived experience that could contribute to a vision of an integrated approach to grief in a synodal spirit within the fields of psychology, spirituality, and ritual studies. The triangulation of the synodal spirit—encounter, listen, and discern—could serve methodologically as a mode of approaching bereavement, oppression, and deprivation, particularly for women struggling in their everyday lives (physically, mentally, and spiritually).

⁵² Vinita Hampton Wright, “Praying the Truth,” *Ignatian Spirituality*, August 14, 2023, ignatianspirituality.com/praying-the-truth/.

Pope Francis in his address at the opening of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality declared, “If, in this Synod, we end up with an identical statement, everybody the same, without nuances, the Spirit is not there; he is left out. He creates that harmony which is not synthesis, but a bond of communion between dissimilar parts.”⁵³ To listen to women in the “third space” is to encounter the Holy Spirit, the source of communion-in-diversity. This encounter obliges us to accompany women in the “field hospital” of their grounded realities, with a profound respect for their socio-cultural distinctness. Embarking on this synodal path is what makes it truly life-enhancing: it ensures that for every woman walking her own road to Emmaus, the journey culminates in a personal and transformative meeting with Christ, who offers hope and love.

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⁵³ Pope Francis, “Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,’” October 4, 2023, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html.

10. Dis/ableism: Placing the Spotlight on the “Missing People”: Unrecognized and Unthought Indonesian Women with Disabilities

Kristine Meneses and Megawati Naibaho

Disability, a shared human experience, can stem from different causes like traits present from birth, acquired conditions, accidents, or societal factors such as war, climate, or poverty. It is a complex issue that involves cultural, socio-economic, and political aspects, and sometimes connects with gender perspectives, given its significant focus on the body. Curiously, within feminist and theological discourses and conversations, disability remains notably at the periphery. Disability resembles a secondary consideration, akin to a “consolation prize,” when acknowledged. The absence of disability within these conversations raises the question: what unique elements does disability offer that remain conspicuously absent from feminist theological discourse? Does the absence of disability in feminist discussions relate to its association with vulnerability and dependence? Could the visibility of disability challenge or cast doubt upon society’s esteem for independence, control, or autonomy? These presumptions merit thorough examination, particularly in societies like Indonesia that prioritize performance, especially concerning women with disabilities. The diverse experiences of disability among the respondents in this study are deeply rooted in their respective contexts.

The onset of impairment and disability can occur unexpectedly, impacting lives at any juncture and thereby becoming an inevitable facet of the human experience. Understanding the narratives of Indonesian women with physical disabilities is crucial, given their perseverance in navigating a world that often proves unwelcoming and hostile toward them. Regrettably, contemporary society continues to operate within rigid

binaries of us/them, male/female, hetero/homo, normal/abnormal, able/disabled, and other such dichotomies, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and exclusion. For Indonesian women with disabilities, this societal bigotry has fostered an environment of dis/ableism, leading them to voluntarily withdraw from visibility to shield themselves from recurring anguish and harm.

Institutionalized and Internalized: Dis/Ableism as an Unrecognized “Normal”

Let us begin this section by posing several questions: Have we habitually perceived disability through a negative lens, characterizing it as an undesirable condition? Have we exalted technological advancements that promise independence for individuals with disabilities, not only for their potential autonomy but also to absolve them from feeling burdensome to society? To what extent have we idealized the concept of independence? Do we perceive disability as a predicament or a liability? Are individuals with disabilities automatically deemed incapable of fulfilling tasks? Is disability inherently seen as an imperfection necessitating repair, rehabilitation, or correction? How frequently have we averted our gaze from the realm of disability? Is the reluctance to decline requests rooted in the fear of being perceived as weak, incapable, or inadequate? Is there a tendency to exert extra effort to demonstrate one’s capabilities? Are we adept at interacting with individuals with disabilities? Is assistance offered without seeking their consent? Does the notion of disabled individuals serving as inspiration arise from their resilience in accomplishing “remarkable” feats despite their disabilities?

These questions reveal how we subconsciously frame disability, potentially leading us to downplay or overlook its significance. They mark the beginning of acknowledging our inadvertent acceptance of widespread but often unnoticed oppression: dis/ableism. They offer an opportunity to highlight dis/ableism, prompting a reevaluation of our attitudes, behaviors, culture, and systems regarding disability and those affected by it.

Similar to racism, dis/ableism is a discriminatory force that oppresses and devalues persons with disabilities. Dis/ableism subtly pervades societal and religious structures, often overlooking its ethical and moral implications. Fiona Kumari Campbell, a feminist disability scholar, emphasizes how dis/ableism institutionalizes the negation of disability through compulsory normality. This normalization internalizes dis/ableism, shaping an inherently negative perception of disability entrenched in societal practices and consciousness, cultural norms, and structural frameworks.¹

Dis/ableism manifests in beliefs, processes, and practices that produce and maintain the fictional ideal of the normal self and body, which contours what it means to be fully human. Hence, disability is considered a diminished/undesirable state of what it means to be human.² Similarly, Veronica Chouinard defines ableism as “ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized . . . and largely invisible ‘others.’”³ In addition, Chouinard rightly observes that what seems amiss in this concept of ableism is its operation as the norm. According to Bruno Latour, “The disabled body induces a fear as being a body out of control because of its appearance of uncontainability”⁴; thus, society promotes the necessity and desirability of repairing a disabled body.

Dis/ableism also takes a patronizing form known as “inspiration porn,” a term used by disability rights advocate Stella Young.⁵ This phenomenon, seen in memes and social media, highlights the resilience of disabled individuals, but it objectifies them for the temporary upliftment of able-bodied individuals. Young argues this narrative diminishes the daily reality

¹ Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 166.

² Fiona Kumari Campbell, “Inciting Legal Fictions: Disability’s Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law,” *Griffith Law Review* 10 (2001): 44.

³ Veronica Chouinard, “Making Space for Disabling Difference: Challenging Ableist Geographies,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15 (1997): 380.

⁴ Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 8.

⁵ Stella Young, “I am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much,” TED Talk, June 2014, [ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much](https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much).

of disabled lives, trapping them in a cycle that overlooks social barriers as well as their daily experiences.

Building upon Judith Butler's work, Robert McRuer argues that establishing the normativity of an abled body proves unattainable due to the unpredictable and unforeseen nature of impairment and disability. McRuer saw that Butler's gender performativity could be extended to disability studies, and he argues that "able-bodiedness offers normative . . . positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals [able-bodiedness] itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. Indeed, I would offer this insight into [able-bodied identity] as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself, as an alternative [disabled] perspective."⁶

The regime of able-bodiedness is indeed a parody, a comedy, because able-bodied status is transient, and disability is a singular identity category universally experienced if individuals live a sufficiently extended lifespan. Considerable aspects regarding the reality of disability remain obscured, disregarded, disavowed, and rejected because they upset and disrupt presumed bodily and ontological security. Reflecting on Michel Foucault's insights, it becomes evident that within this context, "fear has a target object"⁷ wherein disability becomes the focal point. Disability is now perceived as a threat to the cherished ideals of independence, control, and autonomy, casting individuals with disabilities as disruptors, deviants, inherently different, and relegated to a diminished state. Fear operates as a potent force shaping societal convictions that the disabled body must either be rectified or concealed. Moreover, owing to this fear, disability

⁶ Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 93–94. McRuer has drawn this from Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006), 155.

⁷ Kristine Meneses, "L'Arche, a Radical Reversal: Fearless Dialogue between Foucault and Vanier with the New Testament," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 24, no. 2 (2020): 156, doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1718571.

finds itself consigned to the “nether regions of the unthought,” resulting in the erasure of disability. Yet individuals with disabilities persist as enduring realities.

Unpacking how ableism operates and is maintained is evident in the absence of narratives of women with physical disabilities or the scarcity of data on their demographic representation. Thus, it matters to search and provide a space for the narratives of disabled Indonesian because their assertions serve to relativise the absolute claims of the many non-disabled. Their voices, their narratives, and their visibility serve as a pathway towards a “third” space for these “missing people.”

In Search of the Missing: Nanoscopic “Synodality” with Indonesian Women With Disabilities

As previously discussed, disability and persons with disabilities are placed in the nether regions of the unthought. Rosi Braidotti, a feminist post-humanist brings to light the “missing people” and elevates the voices and experiences of those often left unacknowledged in discussions about humanity. Braidotti argues for “actualization . . . enacted through collectively shared, community-based praxis . . . [and] recomposition of a missing people.”⁸ Case in point, Indonesian women with disabilities are among the “missing people” deserving prominence within this discourse.⁹ Therefore, to fully comprehend the impact of dis/ableism, it becomes imperative to delve into the narratives of persons with disabilities, positioning this chapter as a “third” space to amplify their voices and experiences.

Dis/ableism, a form of discrimination, manifests notably through physical barriers, inaccessible ramps, inadequate public transit, and technology devoid of assistive features like voice descriptions or closed

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), 100.

⁹ Indonesia, primarily a Muslim nation with a minority Catholic population, experiences a degree of religious freedom under the Joko Widodo regime. However, despite this religious plurality, the invisibility of women with physical disabilities persists.

captions. Though these are blatant forms of discrimination, the roots lie deeper. Additionally, dis/ableism permeates attitudes and behaviours, framing persons with disabilities as inherently dependent or incapable, further marginalizing women with disabilities who face a double bind of prejudice.

Patriarchal attitudes compound pre-existing prejudice, amplifying the vulnerability of Indonesian women with disabilities and aggravating their suffering and indignity. As expressed by one respondent:¹⁰ “The suffering and humiliation of our dignity as women and disabled become even more severe for us.” This harsh synergy reinforces societal perceptions that cast disabled individuals, especially women, as “*sampah masyarakat*” or social trash. When questioned about the impact of the Catholic Church’s treatment of Indonesian women with disabilities and their connection with the church, their answers were:

For Anne:¹¹

Orang cacat seperti saya diabaikan Gereja, sehinggasaya ragu untuk berpartisipasi aktif. Pengabaian initelah menyebabkan banyak dari kami menarik diri dari gereja dan keterlibatan sosial yang lebih luas. Pengalaman pengucilan mengakibatkan keterputusan yang mendalam. (Disabled members like myself feel neglected by the church, leading to hesitancy in active participation. This neglect has caused many of us to withdraw from both the church community and broader social engagement, leaving a profound sense of exclusion and disconnection.)

She further expressed her sentiments in these words:

Ketika saya mengikuti kegiatan gereja sering menghadapi tatapan simpatik atau merendahkan. Hal ini menimbulkan ketidaknyamanan

¹⁰ Retroactive approval of this study was granted by the Ethics Review Board of the Sekolah Tinggi Pastoral Dian Mandala Gunungsitoli, North Sumatra-Indonesia (henceforth STP Dian Mandala), which confirms that this study was conducted in full compliance with the standard ethics protocol.

¹¹ The names of the respondents in this study are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

dan semakin rendah diri. Menjadi seorang perempuan dan cacat membuka pintu lebar pada diskriminasi dan marginalisasi. (When I attend church, I often encounter sympathetic or condescending looks, fostering discomfort and feelings of inferiority. Being a woman with a disability seems to amplify experiences of discrimination and marginalization.)

She recounted distressing mistreatment from her former job at a Catholic school, under a religious congregation (notably from a nun), significantly affecting her self-worth. Despite facing discrimination in the church and being unemployed, she serves as the treasurer of her prayer group, and like other parishioners, she is expected to contribute to parish expenses.

Another respondent, Elly, has this to say:

Saya tidak pernah mengikuti kegiatan doa di lingkungan atau komunitas basis Gerejawi. Saya kesulitan beradaptasi dengan tempat baru dan tidak ingin menjadi pusat perhatian. Saya tidak mampu untuk bergerak bebas. (I've never engaged in prayer activities within the neighborhood or the church community due to some challenges I face in adjusting to new environments. I prefer not to draw attention or rely on assistance as my mobility is significantly limited.)

One of the authors of this chapter, Megawati Naibaho, who understands the plight of those considered “dis-abled,” shares her feeling in the light of from her lived experiences:

Saya merasa sedih saat berdoa karena tidak mampu membuat tanda salib dengan tangan kananku. Namun lebih menyakitkan, Ketika kumenyalam dengan menyodorkan tangan kananku yang ditopang tangan kiriku berbagairaksispontan, adamemandang dengan wajah heran, kasihan dan ada juga yang seakan-akanmengejek. (Sometimes, I feel sad knowing I cannot use my right hand to make the sign of the cross in prayer. It's tough when I extend my right hand, supported by my left, for a greeting, and people react with disbelief, pity, or even mockery.)

Encountering dis/ableist attitudes poses significant challenges. Frustration with the Catholic Church arises from its consistent oversight and exclusion of persons with disabilities. Dis/ableist structures persist in society, particularly affecting those from non-affluent backgrounds. Respondents highlighted the high cost of quality education as a barrier, rendering formal education inaccessible. This lack of access hinders skill development, limits opportunities for permanent employment and a secure future, and ultimately renders them unemployable, exacerbating their marginalization.

Indonesian women with disabilities share narratives of societal and church-level exclusion, impacting their dignity both on a larger societal scale and in their everyday encounters of ableism within their social circles. Despite claims of cultural openness, unchallenged dis/ableism persists within ecclesiastical spheres, revealing society's discomfort with disability and vulnerability. These women's "missing" presence from society reflects the need to acknowledge and address the framing of disability, as it shapes perceptions of valuable, meaningful, and mournable lives, both on an individual and societal level.

Frames of (Un)recognition: Disability Denied and Dismissed

*Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive.*¹²

Disability scholar Lennard Davis stressed that we should not "ignore [deny or dismiss]¹³ the unstable nature of disability . . . [or] try to fix [disability]."¹⁴ Throughout history, societal responses to disability's disruption and its unsettled condition have focused on control and containment through measures like institutionalization and medication. Judith Butler suggests

¹² Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (Routledge, 1999), 25.

¹³ The bracketed words are the author's insertion.

¹⁴ Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York University Press, 2002), 26.

that anxiety is a catalyst for new possibilities, thus, this anxiety around disability warrants interrogation of assumptions that shape the ideal of normality.¹⁵ Framed by fear, disability is often denied and dismissed. Drawing from Butler, we are challenged to ask, “Who fears disability and why?” She argues that our perceptions of whose life matters are influenced by dominant narratives and images of able-bodiedness and normality, urging us to critically examine these assumptions across various platforms and spaces.¹⁶

The narratives of the Indonesian women with disabilities cited above are merely a fraction of the multitude of stories that need to be heard. The profound impact of a negative framing of disability has a consequential effect on their self-image and self-worth, which is disturbing. It is worth listening to how dis/ableism cuts through their understanding of the self and its impact on them.

Anne recounts her childhood:

Orang tuaku memprioritaskan Pendidikan bagi saudaraku. Saya menolak sikap pembedaan itu, namuntidak berdaya. Sebagai Perempuan cacat, biaya pendidikan sangat mahal. Akibatnya, saya kurang berpendidikan. (My parents prioritized education for my brother due to financial constraints. As a woman with a disability, the high cost of special education was unaffordable for me, resulting in inadequate education.)

This is how Elly looks at her disability:

Saya tidak maumenikah dengan seseorang yang secara fisik “normal.” Saya takut dihina, dicemooh, atau bahkan diceraikan. Saya percaya jika pasanganku cacat akan memahami dan menghormatiku. Ajaibnya, doaku terkabul; suamiku cacat, meski tidak parah. Keluarganya sangat menentang pernikahan kami. Mereka takut saya menjadi beban atau

¹⁵ Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, “Changing the Subject: Judith Butler’s Politics of Radical Resignification,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 728.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2010).

bergantung padanya. (I hesitated to marry someone without a disability, fearing future insults, ridicule, or divorce. I believed a partner with a similar disability would understand and respect me better. Miraculously, my prayers were answered; my husband has a less severe disability. However, his family strongly opposed our marriage, fearing I might burden or rely on him.)

Megawati recalled:

Setelah kecelakaan dan cacat, ku menjadi pesimis sebagai suster. Kuingin meninggalkan biara, tetapi Pemimpin tidak mengizinkan. Melalui refleksi dan bimbingan, akhirnya, ku pasrah pada penyelenggaraan Tuhan dan menerima keadaan cacat sebagai salib yang harus dipikul dengan setia. Ku menjalankan aktivitas dan berusaha bertanggung jawab. (Becoming disabled after an accident made me doubt my religious calling. I wished to leave the Congregation, but the Superior General refused. After reflection and guidance, I entrusted my life to God's providence, embracing my disability as a cross to bear faithfully. I'm active in various activities and committed to responsibility.)

These narratives are forms of internalized ableism of which they are not aware. Internalized ableism means a disabled person has taken on society's negative views of disability. This leads to self-shame and a fear of seeking help, because they live in a world that often devalues them. For John McDermott, such experiences push persons with disabilities to self-denigration and exclusion, which for him are forms of "psychic oppression." This internalized oppression operates as a form of "starvation" where disability is considered an inherently negative and a problem, thereby severing persons with disabilities from "possibilities of future experiences."¹⁷ For McDermott, such missed possibilities include the opportunity for emotional growth.¹⁸

¹⁷ John J. McDermott, *Streams of Experience: Reflections in the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 215.

¹⁸ Marks, *Disability*, 25.

Resonant with a similar perspective, trauma expert Gabor Maté asserts that trauma arises internally as a response to a distressing experience—when we struggle to process or adequately cope with situations that could potentially cause harm. Thus, internalized ableism can be seen as a manifestation of trauma. Disability studies often overlook the emotional dimensions of stigma and trauma. Deborah Marks eloquently explains the acts of self-exclusion and voluntary erasure, identified as internalized ableism or, as she terms it, “internalized oppression”: “Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist. Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives.”¹⁹

Marks aligns with Mason’s perspective, emphasizing the importance of exploring not only the interactions of persons with disabilities with others but also their relationship with themselves. Among the respondents, their responses varied—one opted for societal withdrawal, another exhibited concealed anger and resistance, and yet another responded compliantly with her congregation.

Recognizing the diverse responses of these Indonesian women with disabilities to internalized oppression is crucial, particularly when these responses are ingrained in a person’s system of beliefs, often without their awareness. Marks asserts this perspective: “Some experiences are so painful that we repress them from conscious awareness. Yet they continue to affect self-esteem and shape thoughts and actions.”²⁰

Many persons with disabilities emulate and “embrace” what is required by an ableist society, assuming identities that deviate from their authentic selves, contributing to their marginalization.²¹ Thereby, to “fit” in,

¹⁹ Marks, *Disability*, 25.

²⁰ Marks, *Disability*, 26.

²¹ Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 26.

“disabled people become complicit in their demise, reinforcing impairment as an undesirable and [negative] state,”²² perpetuating a constant state of ambivalence as they navigate a society that habitually erases their presence and context.²³ This habitually occurs in the experiences of Toba Batak women.²⁴

Instead of embracing disability as ontological, it is imperative to expose the processes and production of dis/ableism that devalue disablement and the disabled. Further, dis/ableism as an epistemological framework and an ontological modality of perceiving one’s being²⁵ has framed the person’s understanding of identity, making them unknowingly complicit in their own being’s demise and cultural erasure. The inconvenient reality of disability prompts many to avert their gaze, seeking remedies or cures, mirroring the often uncritical and unimaginative hermeneutic of healing narratives in the Bible.

Within this context, dis/ableism embodies the dominant power, supported by the consensus of the mainstream, perpetuating the notion that able-bodiedness is the “gold standard” of being fully human. The convergence of “networks of association that produce exclusionary categories and ontologies” effectively leads to an internalized ableism that legitimizes compulsory normality.²⁶

Acquainted with people’s lives, contexts, narratives, and responses to internalized ableism, we are compelled to reconsider the precariousness of their existence, prompting us to respond with indignation, opposition,

²² Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 28.

²³ Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 27.

²⁴ Toba Batak women are part of an indigenous community in North Sumatra, Indonesia, where a deeply patriarchal and patrilineal system privileges male lineage and authority and where cultural beliefs and clan-based social systems normalize and perpetuate gender hierarchy. Within this structure, women are often valued primarily for obedience, domestic labor, and bearing sons, resulting in social, economic, and political marginalization. Disability further intensifies their experience of exclusion. Megawati Naibaho, “The Investigating the Oppression of Toba Batak Women: Call for Empowerment and Woman Leadership,” *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 23, no. 1 (2023): 159.

²⁵ Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 28.

²⁶ Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 19–20.

and critique against the hegemony of compulsory dis/ableism. In this context, the imperative to reframe disability becomes paramount, echoing the sentiments of Judith Butler, “There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness, that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives.”²⁷

Butler’s idea of “frames of recognition” reveals how our views of groups, contexts, and situations are socially shaped. These frameworks frequently influence our sense of responsibility, sometimes without critical examination, toward specific groups, like persons with disabilities. This critique is crucial for highlighting systems that overlook or fail to embrace diverse perceptions and manifestations of humanity, particularly concerning disability.

Butler compels society and the Catholic Church to pause and re-evaluate the negative assumptions and frames surrounding disability that contributed to the production and maintenance of dis/ableism and associated phobias—creating exclusion, disenfranchisement, and violation for women with disabilities. Privileging able-bodied lives has effectively rendered the lives of Indonesian women with disabilities, in the words of Butler, ungrivable and unmournable.²⁸ Internalizing ableism leads them to believe their lives scarcely matter and compels them to hide from public scrutiny, effectively erasing their narratives from wider acknowledgment. Therefore, dis/ableism has undermined and excluded women with disabilities from the equation of full and meaningful human experiences.

The contexts and narratives of Indonesian women with disabilities can either haunt, disturb, or bother us, or we stubbornly refuse to be affected by them. If we opt not to be haunted, there is no loss, because life is not acknowledged to begin with.²⁹

²⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, 77.

²⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, 98.

²⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 97.

Interlude: Visitations, A Nanoscopic Synodality and Micro-Synodal Spaces in Homes

Initiating transformative change does not require grand gestures or extravagant endeavors. Often, the catalyst lies in seemingly insignificant or even imperceptible actions. The cumulative effect of these small, incremental steps can yield profound results. In this context, we have employed the terms ‘nano’ and ‘micro’ to emphasize the potential impact of minute activities.

The term “nano” is frequently employed in scientific contexts, such as nanotechnology, nanoparticles, and nanomaterials. Derived from the Latin word “nanus” or the Greek “nanos,” meaning “dwarf,” the term precisely denotes one billionth of a unit. However, given its polysemic nature, “nano” extends beyond the technical or scientific lexicon. In this instance, we have adopted a linguistic and rhetorical approach to the term. Consequently, the terms “nanoscopic” and “micro-synodal” are employed as descriptors, communicating not only an observation but also an extremely minute pastoral activity with potential impact when regularly practiced.³⁰ Such social-pastoral activities are exemplified through home visitation, which is analogous to a table fellowship that is akin to the historical Jesus’s actions as depicted in the Gospels.

Moreover, synodality can be understood as a mode of church governance characterized by a deep commitment to listening to its people. This listening extends beyond mere auditory perception, involving a genuine intent to understand that fosters meaningful conversation, exchange, reciprocal engagement, and inclusion. Through this process, the church can cultivate transformation and well-being, both individually and communally.

The Gospels portray Jesus as a man deeply invested in human connection, often engaging in table fellowship. In first-century Palestine, the patron-client system and honor/shame-based culture were prevalent.

³⁰ Max Boholm, “The Use and Meaning of Nano in American English: Towards a Systematic Description,” *Ampersand* 3 (2016): 165.

Jesus's table fellowship challenged these hierarchical and binary structures, fostering a sense of community and equality. The communal nature of meals in first-century households, involving shared meals, often served on a single platter and eaten with broken flatbread, facilitated storytelling and a sense of familiarity, thus fostering egalitarianism and undermining discrimination. By breaking down social barriers and embracing those marginalized by society, Jesus's open commensality demonstrated a radical commitment to inclusivity and challenged the prevailing power system that valued status and hierarchical structures.

My (Megawati) attempts to realize the mission of Jesus through my engagements in the community could illustrate the pastoral impact of nanoscopic interventions. My personal inclination towards human connection has led me to prioritize engagement with marginalized individuals, particularly women with disabilities. Given my own experience with disability, I feel a deep empathy for their unique challenges. To ensure their comfort and convenience, I offer them the autonomy to determine the time and place of our meetings, respecting their existing commitments. While scheduling can be demanding, open dialogue and mutual understanding have consistently facilitated productive arrangements. It is important to emphasize that my visits are always conducted with their explicit permission, reflecting my unwavering respect for their agency.

During my visits, I strive to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere, actively listening to their needs and concerns. These interactions are not isolated events but rather ongoing engagements designed to foster a sense of connection and belonging, consciously avoiding the perception that they are objects of charity. Hence, I aim to cultivate genuine friendships with those marginalized by society in general and the church in particular. Consistent visitation has facilitated the development of deep rapport, characterized by mutual trust, respect, and compassion, rather than a transactional relationship.

The nanoscopic synodality of listening, conversation, and relationship-building, coupled with the micro-synodal spaces provided by home visits,

extends beyond mere pastoral activity. These interactions create a fertile ground for transformation, impacting both the lives of the visitor and the one being visited.

A notable example of nanoscopic synodality occurred during my initial visit to Anne, an Indonesian woman with disabilities. Initially expressing distrust and skepticism towards my presence, Anne's reservations were rooted in a traumatic past experience with a nun from our congregation. This deeply rooted prejudice, stemming from the negative encounter, made her initially hesitant to engage with me. However, through sustained interaction and genuine empathy, Anne eventually recognized my individuality and was willing to accept my visit, sharing her personal narrative as a woman with disabilities.

A similar experience unfolded with Elly, another Indonesian woman with disabilities. Creating a third space for the "missing people," another visitation with a woman with disability is called for. Before my home visit, Elly admitted that she was hesitant to meet me. She discussed the matter of my visit with her husband. The husband encouraged her, and she later agreed to welcome me into her home. Upon our first meeting, Elly expressed heartfelt gratitude for my visit, acknowledging the joy and connection it brought. Our shared time fostered a deeper bond and strengthened our unity.

Our conversations encompassed a wide range of topics, from the daily challenges of survival to the pursuit of financial stability. Laughter often punctuated our interactions, sharing light-hearted moments. However, the depth of our connection was evident in the more serious and emotionally charged conversations that frequently moved us to tears, leading to moments of shared vulnerability. Our home visits typically concluded with a prayer, reaffirming the presence of God in our lives and providing strength and encouragement for our continued journeys.

The stories recounted by disabled women during my visitations, as well as my own life journey with disability, reveal the pervasive and persistent

nature of prejudice against disability.³¹ Home visitation, a form of nanoscopic synodality, has proven to be an enriching experience. These intimate spaces, micro-synodal in nature, facilitate as well as embody the spirit of open-commensality (table fellowship). Beyond personal enrichment, home visitation offers a valuable opportunity to deepen our connection with marginalized individuals. Through these personal encounters, we can tangibly touch the lives of others, fostering an atmosphere of genuine love, respect, and mutual affirmation of our shared dignity as women with disabilities created in the image of God. Home, as a micro-synodal space, fosters encounters and engagements that embody nanoscopic synodality. In these intimate settings, listening becomes a reflexive process, allowing me to not only hear their stories but also to reflect on my own experiences.

Through our shared experiences, several transformative changes have occurred. Notably, these individuals have come to embrace their unique identity and recognize their inherent dignity. Despite societal marginalization and neglect, they have discovered that they are not alone and that some care for and support them. This newfound optimism has strengthened their faith in God, fostering a belief in divine care and guidance. Home visitation, as a praxis of ethical care, is characterized by mutual respect and agency, devoid of power differentials. This approach aligns with feminist ethics of care, which prioritizes interdependence and caring relationships free from power asymmetry. A particularly inspiring development is the willingness of these individuals to forgive those who have caused them harm. Through the process of nanoscopic synodality within their micro-synodal homes, transformative change has taken place.

As a nun, I have undergone a profound transformation through these home visitations. These encounters have significantly impacted my life, prompting me to step beyond the confines of the convent and engage with marginalized individuals. I am now more motivated to fulfill my calling as

³¹ See Eva Feder Kittay, "The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability," *Ratio Juris: An International Journal of Jurisprudence and Philosophy of Law* 24, no. 1 (2011): 49–58.

a religious, dedicating myself to the service of others. I encourage my fellow sisters to recognize the importance of this vocation, emphasizing that it is not about personal gain but rather about serving the needs of others.

My own journey has been marked by self-acceptance and a shift in perspective regarding disability. Initially viewing disability as a limitation, I have come to recognize its potential as a source of strength and growth. The loss of my right arm has shaped my worldview, enabling me to see the world through the lens of an Indonesian woman with disabilities. This experience has taught me the value of interdependence and the courage to seek assistance, fostering humility. I was previously aware of societal vulnerabilities, but living with a disability has deepened my awareness and sensitivity toward marginalized groups—especially women with disabilities. This personal experience has fostered a deeper sense of solidarity and empathy, allowing me to connect more meaningfully with those facing similar challenges.

We cannot ignore the pervasive nature of prejudice against disability. Home visitation, as a contemporary reimagining of Jesus's table fellowship, offers a transformative experience for both the visitor and the visited. Through this process, individuals can undergo a *metanoia*, a gradual realization of self-acceptance that fosters respectful, caring relationships grounded in trust and agency. In home visitation, the absence of power dynamics fosters coexistence, interdependence, and solidarity that reflect God's commitment, as the practice—marked by inclusivity—transcends distinctions and categorizations. From an ecclesiological perspective, Jesus's outreach to the marginalized can be seen as a manifestation of the divine spirit.³²

Jesus's "open commensality confounds the insider/outsider binary, fractures the normative order and breaks open God's kingdom of love, justice, and equity."³³ Through its engagement with Indonesian women with disabilities, this praxis can be understood as a disability theology that

³² Joseph N. Goh, *Doing Church at the Amplify Open and Affirming Conferences: Queer Ecclesiologies in Asia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 6.

³³ Goh, *Queer Ecclesiologies in Asia*, 152.

resists ableism, exclusion, and the erasure of persons with disabilities. As Megawati elucidates, home visitation debunks power asymmetry.

Home visitation can be understood as a praxis of feminist ethics of care. While the concept of care has often been associated with dependency, this perspective overlooks the possibility of care-based ethics that challenge power inequalities.³⁴ In this context, care is conceived as a personal and communal relationship that respects and affirms the agency of the individual being visited, whereby they actively “participate in decisions which affect their lives,” and “share fully in the social life of their community.”³⁵ By respecting the agency of Indonesian women with disabilities and acknowledging our diversity, we affirm their dignity and strengthen our commitment to understanding our shared humanity.³⁶ By exercising nanoscopic synodal practices through home visitation, we search for the “missing people” of the church.

Where are the “Missing People”? . . . in the “Desert Area”: *Fratelli Tutti*, An Overture to Micro-Synodal Spaces

Pope Francis’s encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, offers a pertinent appeal for individuals to reassess their relationships with one another. The document also addresses various forms of hostility and imposed doctrines that create division and subjugation among different groups—hostility that can be understood as referring to notions of compulsory normality and the broader regime of ableism. Their existence compels us to confront a reality we typically turn away from acknowledging. It is essential that we educate ourselves and challenge our understanding of what it means to live a meaningful and joyful life with disability—recognizing that, despite disability, there is something to gain and potential to be realized.

³⁴ Kittay, “The Ethics of Care,” 54.

³⁵ Jenny Morris, “Impairment and Disability: Constructing an Ethics of Care That Promotes Human Rights,” *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 16.

³⁶ Jenny Morris, “Impairment and Disability,” 16.

In a globalized society that, as *Fratelli Tutti* notes, makes us “neighbors but does not make us brothers” (no. 12), the acknowledgment of lives whose dignity is denied or violated resonates with the experiences of persons with disabilities. This stark reality emphasizes the unequal treatment of human rights, echoing Butler’s argument on the varying grievability of lives. Some are unjustly seen as subhuman, rendering their lives as being considered ungrievable.

While the church staunchly upholds the inherent dignity of individuals, contradictions abound, sparking questions about navigating indignity and inequality in human lives. This predicament prompts reflection on the consequences of denying the reality of disability. Societal hostility and derogatory attitudes toward persons with disabilities fostered barriers opposing the church’s call for a culture of encounter. *Fratelli Tutti* emphasizes that true wisdom involves engaging with reality, advocating for attentive listening, and genuine engagement with persons with disabilities. The encyclical underscores the essential aspect of encounter, which is the “ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounter . . . [where] the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying. . . . We must not lose our ability to listen” (no. 48).

Our capacity for genuine listening has diminished, accompanied by a decrease in patience and an increase in intolerance towards anything that deviates from our established standards. *Fratelli Tutti* underscores how “Persons or situations we find unpleasant . . . or disagreeable are simply deleted” (no. 47). Although the encyclical mentions disability twice only, it commendably acknowledges the significance of listening to their stories because “each of them is able to offer a unique contribution to the common good through their remarkable life stories. . . . We need to have the courage to give a voice to those who are discriminated against due to their disability, because sadly, in some countries even today, people find it hard to acknowledge them as persons of equal dignity” (no. 98).

The long overdue action that society and the Catholic Church can take is to give adequate representation and equal participation of persons with

disabilities in their forums that will elevate and amplify their voices, which have been unheard and silenced for a long time.

As Anne expressed:

Secara fisik kami memang sudah terbatas dan mengalami diskriminasi di masyarakat. Ku berharap para pastor dan suster menghargai dan menerima, bukan sebaliknya, malahan menjadikan kami terpuruk dan dikucilkan. (Physically, we are already limited and experience discrimination in social interactions in society. I hope that the priests and nuns will increasingly respect and accept us with all our limitations, rather than making us worse off and excluded.)

Her articulation is a hard truth: they have been in the “desert area,” which is a space of exclusion. As the encyclical pointed out, “vulnerable members of society are the victims of unfair generalizations” (no. 234); therefore, to mitigate prevailing “hostility,” it is imperative to include their stories to challenge our “unfair generalizations” of disability.

The encyclical states that “each day offers us a new opportunity, a new possibility. . . . We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes” (no. 77). Part of this process is to “seek out others and embrace the world as it is” (no. 78), despite the fear of the unknown, the one we cannot control, and a sense of “inadequacy” that might leave us overwhelmed.

Additionally, the encyclical underscores the significance of exploring fuller existence through another. Healthy relationships facilitate an expansion of self-awareness and a deeper appreciation for diversity (no. 89). By rejecting dis/ableism, meaningful connections with persons with disabilities become attainable, as experienced by the authors of this chapter.

The Indonesian women with disabilities, despite residing in a “desert area,” demonstrated, as indicated in the encyclical, a “remarkable system of welcoming pilgrims as an exercise of the sacred duty of hospitality” (no. 90). But the truth is the opposite—they transform hostility into

hospitality, not out of a “sacred duty,” but because they do not want the (temporary) able-bodied other to experience hostility.

The capacity of persons with disabilities to welcome others is a witness to how “love made possible by God’s grace as a movement outwards towards another,” where the other is no longer a stranger, but someone “united to ourselves” (no. 93). The encyclical rightly expresses that our engagement can cultivate an affinity that will “make us freely desire to seek their good”—not only a matter of charity but also justice.

The encyclical also states, “Social love is a force capable of inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today’s world, of profoundly renewing structures, social organizations, and legal systems from within” (no. 183). This transformation becomes feasible if society is willing to attentively listen to the perspectives of persons with disabilities. By transgressing barriers, listening to them can facilitate a shift towards a society that is inclusive and has universal accessibility.

The presence of persons with disabilities, with their unique lives, perspectives, and cultures, presents a valuable contribution to the broader (temporary) able-bodied society (no. 133). Viewing disability as a distinct way of life, characterized by interdependence, bestows significance upon their humanity—an ontology and epistemology derived from their marginalized position. Consequently, granting them a platform for active participation in decision-making processes, whether in civic or ecclesiastical spheres, makes possible a praxis of social justice—disability justice.

Disability Justice: Re-framing Disability, Transgressing Dis/ableism

An ideal may be “lost” by being rendered unspeakable, that is, lost through prohibition or foreclosure.³⁷

A queer disability theologian, Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, shared in a forum about her disability (born with cerebral palsy): “It feels like people . . . are

³⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 196.

not interested in it (disability), just want to shield that away and get this very thin core of some kind of standard normal. I guess I'm not that interested in being 'normal' . . . I love it (disability). I was not going to let it be erased."³⁸ The invisibility and erasure of their experiences and lived realities stems from societal frames of disability as a loss, tragic, and sad. It is crucial to critically analyze these frames that have led to the dismissal of our ethical responsibility toward them. As Butler has put it, "The prohibition of images and representations more generally circumscribes the sphere of appearance, what we can see and what we can know. But it would be a mistake to think that . . . a certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image."³⁹

When there is no image, no name, or representation of toxic positivity, it projects an inauthentic life that denies the existence of vulnerability, precarity, or marginality.⁴⁰ Butler suggested that the obvious presence of discrimination should make us evaluate our ways of framing. Filtering, censoring, and controlling what aspects of life are brought to attention or emphasized perpetuates erasure and marginalization of their reality. This distortion takes place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained.

The experience of Indonesian women with disabilities has been marked by derealization, prompting a call for ethical action. Butler emphasizes the crucial role of framing and language in shaping our perceptions,⁴¹ which do not convey the full reality.⁴² For ableist thinking to be maintained, certain ways of imagining need to remain unspeakable and unspoken. We then ask, what must remain unspeakable for the regime of ableism to continue to exercise power? The absence from representation and

³⁸ Julia Watts Belser, "Conversations in Bioethics 2017: Disability," The Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University, February 2, 2017, sitearchives.georgetown.edu/kie-cib/our-conversations/2017-disability/index.html.

³⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146.

⁴¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 79.

⁴² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 146.

participation of women with disabilities should prompt inquiry into why their narratives are obscured, leading to a numbing effect on our emotional response to their concerns.⁴³

Acknowledging the universality of disability does not imply essentialism. It is crucial to recognize that at some point in our lives, or in the lives of those close to us, we may have encountered impairment or disability due to illness, surgery, or prolonged health issues. For many, these circumstances are framed as disruptions or obstacles to their plans, sometimes leading to feelings of being burdensome to our families, inadvertently fostering internalized ableist perspectives.

According to Anita Ghai, an Indian academician and disability rights activist, “The (disabled) other, in its very strangeness, simply mirrors and represents what is deeply familiar to the centre (able-bodied) It is this process of marginality that produces the resentment, enmity and repugnance for the one who is sensed as the (disabled) other . . . [because] disability provokes fears and anxieties about ‘able body’ mortality, and very easily renders itself [now] as the ‘other.’”⁴⁴

Disability is framed as an uncomfortable reality. Perhaps the resistance to embrace and resist re-imaging disability as a gain, stems from its instability and threat to abled-body. Indeed, for many of us, disability provokes fears and anxieties about “able body” mortality. Nonetheless, this compels us to challenge the all-too-long belief, which even some feminists fall into, that disability is conjoined with dependence and weakness, which contradicts and threatens the image of (fiction of) independence and strength, making feminist disability studies relatively missing in many feminist discourses. It therefore necessitates reframing the negative perceptions and assumptions of disability—dis/ableism—because this is vital to achieving disability justice.

A step towards disability justice is to render disabilities visible, and acknowledgment of disability can prevent the violence stemming from our

⁴³ Butler, *Frames of War*, 100.

⁴⁴ Anita Ghai, *Rethinking Disability in India* (Routledge, 2015), 300.

past denials and erasures.⁴⁵ As Lennard Davis asserts, it is necessary to emphasize that disability is central to human existence for as long as humans have bodies.⁴⁶ Our conversations with Indonesian women with disabilities became a space for the praxis of micro-synodality, characterized by attentive listening to their narratives. Anne drew parallels between our conversation and the gospel story of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha. Immersed in the dialogue, she forgot to bring out her prepared bread, likening herself to Mary's excitement in Jesus's presence. We firmly told her that it was the reverse, she was "Jesus, the storyteller here, and we are eager to listen," and we shared a moment of laughter.

In a similar vein, Elly was reluctant to travel due to numerous negative encounters that stripped away her humanity and reduced her to stares because of her disability. What struck us profoundly was her change of heart by the end of our conversation; she expressed to her husband (also disabled) and only child, "I am now willing and ready to travel." This shift exemplifies how fostering a culture of encounter with persons with disabilities who internalized oppression can transgress dis/ableism. Indeed, encounters hold the power that can transgress and put an end to dis/ableism—a form of disability injustice.

With a glimpse of the reality of Indonesian women with disabilities, it is about time to listen and learn from them, beginning with an encounter, entering their "desert area" that is an oasis in a world that is growingly indifferent and hostile. In addition, an encounter will pave the way to knowing their context, which can compel the call towards inclusion, access, and accommodation via active participation of persons with disabilities in society, which can result in disability justice.

In addition, in her article, "Violence, Disability and the Politics of Healing,"⁴⁷ Watts Belser advocates for accessibility, offering a reinterpreted

⁴⁵ Anna Marie Riedl, *Judith Butler and Theology* (Brill Schönningh, 2021), 56.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, x.

⁴⁷ Julia Watts Belser, "Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing: The Inaugural Nancy Eiesland Endowment Lecture," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 19, no. 3 (2015): 179, doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2015.1061470.

perspective on Isaiah 45:2–3 as God’s decisive commitment to remove obstacles, which for her is a divine gift of access.⁴⁸ In the framework of disability justice, Jennie Weiss Block highlights the need for the church to examine its hidden oppressive structures,⁴⁹ which the respondents in this study encountered. Likewise, feminist disability theologian Nancy Eiesland challenges the church’s reinforcement of a “disabling theology.” In her words: “The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God’s children. Much of church theology and practice—including the Bible itself—has often been dangerous for persons with disabilities, who encounter prejudice, hostility, and suspicion that cannot be dismissed simply as relics of an unenlightened past. Christians today continue to interpret and spin theologies in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, support social and environmental segregation, and mask the lived realities of people with disabilities.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, disability justice can happen by considering disability as a gain, something to offer that makes life worthwhile. Watts Belser challenges the Christian and Jewish traditions that worship a God that is hyper-capable—the ultimate able figure. This translates to us “worshipping” ability, perfection, power, capability, and no limits, which we project onto our lives. In her experience of disability, she posits a profoundly provocative query of imagining God who experiences disability, her experience of epiphany when she re-imagined the text in the book of the prophet Ezekiel about God’s chariot—“God has wheels!”⁵¹ In this text encounter, Watts Belser experienced a “powerful sense of kinship,”⁵² which is a newfound realization of how God moves in the world. When navigating the rough terrain and steep slopes with a gentle

⁴⁸ Belser, “Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing,” 184.

⁴⁹ Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (Bloomsbury, 2002), 11, 122.

⁵⁰ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 10.

⁵¹ Julia Watts Belser, “God on Wheels: Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology,” *Tikkun* 29, no. 4 (2014): 29.

⁵² Belser, “Disability.”

grade, she flips the framing of disability as lack, loss, sadness, and a tragic condition into something positive; she frames her spins on a downhill road as sensual joy that is “exquisitely beautiful.”⁵³

By engaging with the narratives of Indonesian women with disabilities, we shed the layers of fear and hostility, thereby opening ourselves to social friendship marked by a celebration of diversity. Our interaction with them strengthens our commitment to disability justice by reframing the discourse, recognizing that both disabled and able-bodied individuals share similar aspirations, hopes, and diverse narratives that enrich and shape our collective existence.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In the context of the recently concluded Synod of Synodality, this chapter delves into the lived experiences of a demographic of “missing people”: Indonesian women with disabilities. Their narratives intertwine tales of marginalization, trauma, and internalized dis/ableism, yet are infused with a singular hope in God.

Engaging with these individuals must transcend transactional interactions to avoid shallowness in our listening. Superficial engagements risk rekindling experiences of dis/ableism, potentially reopening wounds, and perpetuating feelings of objectification. The pervasive existence of dis/ableism within both the church and society has significantly marred their self-perception. Continuously reframing disability into a positive existence is integral to a genuine culture of encounter, transforming solidarity into resistance against the dis/ableism regime. Through this, the attainment of disability justice signals the realization of God’s reign in the present moment.

Synodality embodies an ongoing process. It demands the creation of secure micro-synodal spaces that foster trust and healthy relationships with

⁵³ Belser, “Disability.”

⁵⁴ Kristine Meneses, “Disability Justice: Reframing Hospitality and Revisioning Inclusion,” *HAPAG: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 16, nos. 1–2 (2019): 81.

these unrecognized and unthought individuals—Indonesian women with disabilities—within both societal and ecclesiastical realms. It prompts us to question our frames of disability that positioned them as being “outside” the church. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the lens through which we view their involvement. Rather than perceiving them as outsiders to be approached, they might rightfully belong within, even within the metaphorical “desert area,” which paradoxically holds an oasis of hospitality. Reversing disability as inherently negative into a catalyst of new possibilities—gain, beauty, and fun—is an exquisite form of disability justice.

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11. *Tabanan* (Home) for Women Survivors of Domestic Violence in a Synodal Church in the Making

Bernadine Lanot and Marnie Racaza

In the 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), 17.5 percent of Filipino women aged 15-49 have experienced physical, sexual, and emotional violence from their intimate partners.¹ With the COVID-19 pandemic, women were forced to remain at home with perpetrators, leading to an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence, most of which are undocumented. As we learn to navigate a post-pandemic era, survivors of domestic violence are still processing their experiences, trying to rebuild their sense of self, and finding safe spaces. At the same time, domestic violence continues to be a pervasive problem. While there are a growing number of feminist care providers catering to victim-survivors of domestic violence, the “feminist care” approach has not been widely incorporated into the pastoral practice of the church.

Catholic groups in the Philippines are then challenged to discern the call of the *Salubong* (Welcoming Encounter) in the Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report (2022), which expresses “the need to make the Church into a safe space for abused women.”² This implies supporting the abused women in their mental health and social-psychological well-being and questioning the church’s patriarchal structures, wherever these contribute to the disempowerment of abused women, such as traditional ideas about the value of self-sacrifice and self-denial for mothers, and the relegation of homemaking to women’s realm of responsibility. And so, this

¹ Philippine Commission on Women, “Violence Against Women,” *Philippine Commission on Women (blog)*, pcw.gov.ph/violence-against-women/.

² Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Salubong (Welcoming Encounter): The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report* (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 2022), 8.

chapter would like to focus on Filipino mothers who experience harm and alienation in their families and churches and remain in abusive relationships out of coercion, desperation, the need to protect their children, or the desire to remain the *ilaw ng tabanan* (“light of the home”). There is a need to deconstruct, reconstruct, and reclaim an idea of “home” or *tabanan* for victim-survivors of domestic violence, as well as the church as a whole.

This chapter begins with a survey of the state of domestic violence in the Philippines and its effects and impact on victim-survivors. Second, it gives a review and discusses some structural barriers that lead to the prevalence of domestic violence. Next, this paper presents insights from interviews with two feminist care practitioners from Lunas Collective: Kara,³ a social worker who used to work with Lunas Collective and helped develop their feminist care approach, and Janine Del Mundo,⁴ Lunas Collective’s project officer for feminist counseling. Lunas Collective is a volunteer-powered care space for women and people of diverse sexualities who experience gender-based violence (GBV) and have concerns about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Then, it attempts to deconstruct, reconstruct, and reclaim home and homemaking by doing vernacular-postcolonial hermeneutics of *tabanan* as *pananahan ng Diyos* (the indwelling of God) and *pagpapatahan* (giving comfort to stop one’s crying). Finally, the chapter suggests a theology of feminist collective care that aims to help the church become more synodal, to be truly a safe space for domestically abused mothers and wives.

³ Kara, interview by Bernadine Lanot and Marnie Racaza, Zoom, September 14, 2024. Kara is not her real name. She has requested to have her details anonymized and for no other identifying information to be included.

⁴ Janine Del Mundo, interview by Bernadine Lanot and Marnie Racaza, September 24, 2024. Janine consented for her real name and identifying information to be shared. Ethics clearance for this project was obtained from the University Research Ethics Office of the Ateneo de Manila University prior to the interviews.

Survey of the State of Domestic Violence in the Philippines

The 2022 NDHS reports that 13 percent of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence, and 4 percent have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.⁵ According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), gender-based violence has short and long-term impacts on women survivors, affecting their physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. This includes injuries, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, gynecological disorders, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and self-harm.⁶ Women seek help from a range of sources, both formal and informal, including family, friends, and religious authorities. When informal support is lacking, they turn to formal sources such as medical services, mental health professionals, shelters, advocacy groups that take up the issue of violence against women (VAW), and legal services.⁷

In general, do women perceive abuse as undesirable or wrong? The 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey reveals the percentage of women who agree that wife-beating is justified. Reasons cited for wife-beating include burning food, arguments, going out without informing their partner, neglecting children, and refusing to have sex. The survey identifies a declining trend in women aged 15–49 who agree with at least one reason justifying wife-beating, dropping from 24 percent in 2003 to 13 percent in 2013 and further to 9 percent in 2022.⁸ An analysis of the 2013 NDHS also indicates that with higher levels of education, exposure

⁵ Philippine Statistics Authority, “2022 Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) Final Report,” psa.gov.ph/content/2022-philippine-national-demographic-and-health-survey-ndhs-final-report.

⁶ United Nations Population Fund, UN Women, and UNICEF, “Ending Violence Against Women and Children in the Philippines,” *UNFPA Asiapacific*, asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/ending-violence-against-women-and-children-philippines.

⁷ Allan B. I. Bernardo and Alicia F. Estrellado, “Locus of Hope and Help-Seeking Intentions of Filipino Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence,” *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues* 36, no. 1 (2017): 67.

⁸ Philippine Statistics Authority, “2022 Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) Final Report.”

to media campaigns promoting gender equality and empowerment, and awareness of VAW support services, Filipino women are less likely to perceive wife-beating as justifiable.⁹

However, it is one thing for women to perceive wife-beating and other forms of violence as unjustifiable and another for victim-survivors to seek help to stop the violence. The statistics show that two in five women (42 percent) aged 15–49 who have experienced physical or sexual violence have never sought help or disclosed the violence to anyone. One in four women (24 percent) who have experienced violence shared their experience but did not seek help. Only one in three (34 percent) women sought help to end the violence.¹⁰

While these statistics provide valuable insights, they do not offer a complete picture of gender-based violence in the Philippines. Firstly, the NDHS lacks data on help-seeking behavior for survivors of other forms of GBV, such as emotional, psychological, or economic abuse. The Philippine Commission on Women acknowledges the issue of underreporting due to a “culture of silence.”¹¹ A report commissioned by UNICEF, UNFPA, and UN Women in 2020 noted that many cases might not progress beyond the Barangay level or local social welfare and development offices, leading to unreliable prevalence data.¹² A study on reporting GBV in 24 developing countries between 2004 and 2011 estimated that the actual prevalence of GBV might be significantly higher

⁹ Wilfred Luis Clamor, “Justification of Intimate Partner Violence in the Philippines: Attitudes Towards Wife Beating Among Filipina Women,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 18, no. 1 (2018): 169.

¹⁰ Philippine Statistics Authority, “2022 Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) Final Report.”

¹¹ Philippine Commission on Women, “Violence Against Women.”

¹² UNFPA, UN Women, and UNICEF, “Ending Violence Against Women and Children in the Philippines,” 16–17. In the Philippines, the barangay is the smallest administrative and political unit of government, serving as the primary site for local governance, basic services, and community-based interventions.

than what health systems data or police reports suggest, underestimating the actual prevalence of GBV from 11- to 128-fold.¹³

Structural Barriers Leading to the Prevalence of Domestic Violence

While awareness among women that wife-beating is not justified is increasing, ending domestic violence remains challenging due to structural and sociocultural barriers for women to seek help or a way out of their situation. Although nearly 90 percent of women are aware of local authorities like the Barangay VAW desk, DSWD Regional Center for Women or Girls, and the PNP Women and Children's Protection Desk, only 1 in 10 women seek help from these government units.¹⁴ Women are less likely to approach the justice system due to its ineffectiveness, corruption, bribery, and the psychological difficulty of facing court proceedings and perpetrators while sharing their stories in public.¹⁵ Narratives from survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Cebu City also reveal their fear of retaliation from abusers if they lose their cases.¹⁶ Some government authorities even subject survivors to humiliation and

¹³ Tia Palermo, Jennifer Bleck, and Amber Peterman, "Tip of the Iceberg: Reporting and Gender-Based Violence in Developing Countries," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 179, no. 5 (2014): 602.

¹⁴ Philippine Statistics Authority, "2022 Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) Final Report." DSWD refers to the Department of Social Welfare and Development, which provides government-run social protection and welfare services, while the Philippine National Police (PNP) Women's and Children's Protection Desks are specialized units mandated to receive and handle complaints involving GBV, abuse, and exploitation of women and children.

¹⁵ Bernardo and Estrellado, "Locus of Hope and Help-Seeking Intentions of Filipino Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence," 67.

¹⁶ Simeon C. Bernados, Jr and Lanndon A. Ocampo, "Survivors' Social Construction of Intimate Partner Violence in Cebu City, Philippines," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 17–18 (September 2021): 9796–9818.

victim-blaming; for instance, one police officer jokingly told a survivor to have sex with her husband to stop the beatings.¹⁷

The deeply ingrained patriarchy in the Philippines places women in a vulnerable position and interacts with the legal and protective measures in place. Within this patriarchal system, men are designated as the powerful heads of their families, with ownership and control over family members.¹⁸ Defying gender norms can lead to objectification, shame, guilt, and even the justification of violence, contributing to a culture of victim-blaming.¹⁹ The UNICEF, UNFPA, and UN Women report identifies victim-blaming and the fear of bringing shame to the family as the main reasons for underreporting of cases, as many consider VAW a “private matter” and stigmatize sharing these issues publicly.²⁰

Sociocultural expectations place significant pressure on women to be self-sacrificing, tolerant (known as *mapagtiis* or *mapagpasensiya*), and temperate (referred to as *mapagtimpi*) as wives and mothers.²¹ These expectations prioritize the family’s reputation and honor over women’s well-being and safety.²² Women with children often feel the need to protect their families and maintain family unity, fearing that their children

¹⁷ Roselle A. Jardin and Jucl A. Jaluague, “Inner Strength and Coping Strategies of Women Victims of Domestic Violence in Cebu City, Philippines,” *Human Behavior, Development & Society* 23, no. 3 (2022): 48.

¹⁸ Racidon P. Bernarte, Quennie Marie M. Acedegbega, Mariah Louise A. Fadera, and Hanna Jemima G. Yopyop, “Violence Against Women in the Philippines,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 1 (February 2018): 122.

¹⁹ Isabel Kristine M. Valdez, MaVeronica Pia N. Arevalo, Janine Patricia G. Robredo et al., “Violence Against Women in the Philippines: Barriers to Seeking Support,” *The Lancet Regional Health: Western Pacific* 23, no. 100471 (2022).

²⁰ UNFPA, UN Women, and UNICEF, “Ending Violence Against Women and Children in the Philippines,” 17.

²¹ Bernardo and Estrellado, “Locus of Hope and Help-Seeking Intentions of Filipino Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence,” 68.

²² Valdez, Arevalo, Robredo et al., “Violence Against Women in the Philippines: Barriers to Seeking Support.”

may grow up without fathers.²³ The burden on women is substantial, as they are expected to be the *ilaw ng tabanan* or the light of the home, responsible for creating a safe and nurturing environment for their families. Any perceived failure in maintaining this role places additional pressure on mothers. Consequently, women endure suffering until the violence reaches an extreme and unbearable level, causing long-term harm to their bodies, minds, and families. Mananzan writes:

The care and education of children is put in a whole package, beginning with pregnancy, and is handed to the woman as her main role. She is conditioned to think that she is responsible for the success or failure of her marriage and that whatever success she may experience in her life, if somehow her marriage does not work, she is a failure. Many a wife-battering is justified because a woman fails to comply with the image of a subservient “good housewife” . . . The fact that a “broken home” is a failure that would be put at her door, also makes her hesitate to separate from a violent husband. So, she endures long years of humiliation and pain “for the sake of the children.”²⁴

Entrenched patriarchal norms, supported by legal and sociocultural barriers, are also influenced by religious beliefs. For instance, the absence of a divorce law in the Philippines traps women in abusive relationships. Passing the law faces resistance from some religious institutions (predominantly Catholic), who express concerns that addressing domestic violence and promulgating anti-rape laws may lead to more divorces and harm to families.²⁵ Sr. Nila Bermisa, in her book *That She May Dance Again*, writes scathingly: “The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines,

²³ Bernardo and Estrellado, “Locus of Hope and Help-Seeking Intentions of Filipino Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence.”

²⁴ Mary John Mananzan, “Feminine Socialization: Women as Victims and Collaborators,” in *Violence Against Women*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (SCM Press, 1994), 48.

²⁵ UNFPA, UN Women, and UNICEF, “Ending Violence Against Women and Children in the Philippines,” 15.

despite all its power and influence as an institution and its commitment to be a church of the poor, has not helped to alleviate the subordination and exploitation of women. It has reinforced the silencing of women, especially about violence against women in the home and the church.”²⁶ While women seek help from religious authority and confide in priests, as observed by Sr. Nila, they are mostly unable to provide a safe space. This is because priests are “inculcating self-sacrifice and forgiveness to women victims using theology where women are supposed to give unconditional love to their husbands, serving them ‘till death do us part.’ Battered wives have been advised to sacrifice for the sake of the family.”²⁷

Addressing Domestic Violence Through Feminist Collective Care

For battered wives and mothers, their homes have now become spaces of betrayal, abuse, and violence, inflicted by those whom they trust. The trauma caused by domestic violence deeply scars women’s lives and compromises their well-being. Thus, what is needed is an ethic of care that will empower women victim-survivors in rebuilding homes for themselves. Carol Gilligan provides a psychological framework and defines feminist ethics of care as “grounded in voice and relationship, as an ethic of resistance both to injustice and to self-silencing.”²⁸ In *The Birth of Pleasure*, Gilligan observes how women have been desensitized to their own emotions and pleasures, as they are made to believe that silencing, concealing, and sacrificing themselves is required for maintaining harmony in relationships, and thus the pleasure of truly expressing oneself is seen as a threat or danger to the relationship.²⁹ However, dissociation may be an adaptive strategy for survival within patriarchy and a response

²⁶ Nila V. Bermisa, *That She May Dance Again: Rising from Pain of Violence Against Women in the Philippine Catholic Church* (Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, 2011), 65.

²⁷ Bermisa, 72.

²⁸ Carol Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance* (Polity Press, 2013), 175.

²⁹ Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love* (Knopf Doubleday, 2002).

to trauma that creates a split within persons. Instead, true pleasure is found in confiding relationships where there is trust and vulnerability, as one listens to one's own voice and remains true to self and others against patriarchal norms and expectations. Thus, one must undo dissociation by committing to association with oneself and others. Care, thus, is exercised in sensitivity to context, emotions, relationality, and particular needs, enabling women to freely give and receive care.

The services of Lunas Collective are grounded in feminist care principles. Lunas Collective is a volunteer-powered care space for women and people of diverse sexualities who experience gender-based violence (GBV) and have concerns about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).³⁰ Lunas Collective's services include a chat helpline, education and research on feminist care training and methods, and advocacy and community-building through online and on-ground campaigns on SRHR, mental health, and human rights. As a "community of care," Lunas Collective is an inclusive care space that is home to people of many diverse backgrounds, sexualities, and beliefs, and thus aims to be sensitive to this diversity of social categories and experiences. It is important to note that Lunas Collective is not allied with any churches or religious institutions, though their feminist care principles may also inform our pastoral approaches and teach us ways of accompanying and being with survivors of GBV.

The following are explanations of each principle based on our own understanding and practice as Lunas Collective volunteers, the Lunas Collective website and policy brief,³¹ and online interviews with Kara,³² a social worker who used to work with Lunas Collective and helped develop their feminist care approach, and Janine Del Mundo, Lunas Collective's project officer for feminist counseling. Janine shares that while some aspects of LUNAS, an acronym for Lunas Collective's principles, overlap

³⁰ "Home," *Lunas Collective*, lunascollective.org.

³¹ Sabrina Laya Gacad, "Lunas Collective: Feminist Care Methods as Applied to Pandemic Response," *Lunas Collective Policy Brief*, bit.ly/LCFCPolicyBrief.

³² Kara, interview by Bernadine Lanot and Marnie Racaza, Zoom, September 14, 2024.

with general Psychological First Aid (PFA) frameworks, LUNAS is specifically tailored for feminist care responses to gender-based violence.³³ The Lunas Collective Feminist Care principles are:

- L** – Listen
- U** – Understand
- N** – Nurture
- A** – Autonomy and Action Plan
- S** – Safety and Social Support

Active *listening* means focusing on the survivor and not one's recommendations, judgments, or opinions about what the survivor ought to do. Listening means maintaining confidentiality and asking considerate questions that make the survivor feel safe to share their stories while respecting the limits of what they want to share. Survivors are also respected as “storytellers” or “service users.”³⁴

Understanding is another important feminist principle, as care providers could also practice reflexivity as they seek to understand how their own experiences and contexts influence how they relate to survivors. Kara shares, “It’s not just understanding the situation of the person you’re talking to, but also understanding your own situation . . . You need to be aware of your own biases, trauma, experiences . . . pains, and joys . . . so that you can be ready to help the service user or the storyteller.”³⁵

Another core idea related to understanding is the power imbalance and dynamics and the intersectionality of social categories that shape power and vulnerability to GBV, which care providers need to continuously educate themselves about.³⁶ Janine says, “*Madaling mag-contribute sa marginalization ng taong tinutulungan mo kung mismo ikaw hindi aware sa power na meron ka at kung ikaw mismo hindi aware sa kung bakit*

³³ Janine Del Mundo, interview by Bernadine Lanot and Marnie Racaza, September 24, 2024.

³⁴ Kara, interview.

³⁵ Kara, interview.

³⁶ Del Mundo, interview.

nangayayari 'yun" ("It's easy to contribute to the marginalization of the person you're helping if you yourself are not aware of the power you hold and why (GBV) happens").³⁷ Thus, care providers must be knowledgeable of structural root causes that perpetuate violence. For Kara, it is also essential to be educated about trauma and its effects on the brain, the dynamics of abuse, and the common experiences of survivors, to manage our personal judgments and biases, and share information with survivors that can help them challenge their own self-blame. "If you don't understand the dynamics of abuse, you will really resort to victim-blaming."³⁸

Coming to the principle of *nurturing*, care providers can offer empathy, validation, and support to survivors as well as to themselves through helpful coping or care strategies. The care provider is responsible for their own self-care and ensuring that they are in a good space to provide care for survivors. It is from this space that providers can nurture survivors with "model statements" that reassure them that they are not to blame, that their abuse is not their fault, that they do not deserve to be treated badly, and that we are here to listen without judgment.³⁹ Even in abusive situations, survivors often take actions to protect or care for themselves, and so care providers can also draw their attention to how they are already taking steps. They can also provide information on other care strategies in case the survivors' way of coping is harmful.⁴⁰

On the question of *autonomy*, care providers value survivors' power and autonomy in making decisions for themselves, creating a safe space for them to come up with their own action plans. Janine shares that while violence may reduce a survivor's sense of power, it never fully extinguishes it, and thus, it is crucial not to view survivors as objects of pity. "We see them as people (that), even at the time of the assault or abuse, they did

³⁷ Del Mundo, interview.

³⁸ Kara, interview.

³⁹ Kara, interview.

⁴⁰ Kara, interview.

something to help themselves.”⁴¹ “Autonomy” also acknowledges the power in the lived experiences of GBV survivors. Despite the violence inflicted, survivors retain their agency and deserve to thrive in a culture of care and pleasure that recognizes their inherent value and humanity and “reminds people that they are alive, they are living.”⁴² Thus, care providers and survivors explore together what survivors have already done, what else they want to do about their situation, and how they would like to be helped or accompanied.⁴³ “Emphasizing that whatever they want to do is their decision, *nandito lang tayo* (we are only here) to help them identify their options . . . pros and cons . . . but at the end of the day, it’s their decision.”⁴⁴

Lastly, the care provider can assure the survivor that they are not alone and create a sense of *safety and social support*. They brainstorm and discuss with the survivor where they can get help in available networks, including those closest to them, such as neighbors, friends, and family members. Safety planning also involves “things we can discuss with the survivor, [so that] if something happens at home, they can keep themselves alive.”⁴⁵ This may include plans to ask a neighbor to call the *barangay* or the police when they hear violence escalating and preparing a go-bag in case she and her children need to immediately leave the house, among others. Care providers can also give correct and reliable information about law enforcement, sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and legal support services so survivors can make safe and informed choices.⁴⁶ Justice and care should not be sought solely within the legal system, particularly given the presence of structural barriers, but can also emerge through community-based responses within caring communities.

⁴¹ Del Mundo, interview.

⁴² Del Mundo, interview.

⁴³ Kara, interview.

⁴⁴ Kara, interview.

⁴⁵ Kara, interview.

⁴⁶ Gacad, “Feminist Care Methods as Applied to Pandemic Response.”

The LUNAS framework is a holistic and survivor-centered approach to GBV, with a strong emphasis on offering support grounded in feminist care principles, as it seeks to empower survivors by recognizing their lived experiences and addressing the structural imbalances that contribute to GBV. The care that Lunas offers differs from psychosocial support. Janine shares that psychosocial support responds to a specific need that a client may raise, but if we are cultivating a culture of empathy and care, and the awareness of what is happening and why domestic violence occurs, then we are setting the stage for the first essential step, which is to give people the space to reflect on their stories.⁴⁷ What makes this feminist collective care approach unique is that it informs how we provide support services, as we understand that uneven gender power relations cause distress and trauma. Gacad writes about feminist counseling that “distress and trauma are in part caused by the uneven gender power relations that persist in our society, and that to liberate individuals from this, care and counseling may be necessary.”⁴⁸ Feminist care provides a space for survivors to feel safe in their bodies again and take charge of their lives. “When asked for feedback, survivors describe an ‘unburdening,’ that opening up about their situations and feeling validated and understood all helped them make sense of their complex situations and figure out strategies for self-care or safety.”⁴⁹ Lunas Collective, therefore, has been exhibiting the conditions and characteristics of being a “synodal third space” where victim-survivors of domestic violence are accompanied in their journey towards healing and flourishing.

⁴⁷ Del Mundo, interview.

⁴⁸ Sabrina Laya Gacad, “The Making of Lunas Collective: Building Communities of Care,” in *Resisting Marginality: Filipino Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* (UP Center for Women’s and Gender Studies and Oxfam Pilipinas, 2022), 138.

⁴⁹ Sabrina Laya Gacad, “Care Improves the Power of Gender-Based Violence Survivors,” *Rappler*, rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-care-improves-the-power-of-gender-based-violence-survivors/.

Synodality as Homemaking

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences paper, *The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy*, identifies domestic violence as one of the tensions that commonly breaks the environment of love within the family.⁵⁰ The concerns and death-dealing conditions faced by mothers who are victim-survivors of domestic violence in the home have yet to compel church leadership to listen, discern, and act in a critical, proactive, and compassionate manner to end the cycle of abuse and violence in many households. The ongoing synodal movement in the Catholic Church could nurture a fertile ground for the growth and flourishing of spaces that provide healing and belonging for these women. The working document for the continental stage, entitled "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," released by the General Secretariat of the Synod in October 2022, begins by noting that "synodality is the way of being Church" and if the church does not take the path of synodality, "no one can feel fully at home."⁵¹ The biblical imagery of the tent used in the document is attributed to other images like family, home, and a place where people want to belong and return to.⁵² These connections made between synodality and enlarging the space of the tent, and the tent to that of home suggest that synodality is homemaking.

Home could mean a lot of things to people. It is both an ideal, concept, or metaphor as well as a lived reality.⁵³ Scholars of home differentiate home as a "thing" and home as an "experience" or "process." Home as a "thing"

⁵⁰ Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Central Secretariat, ed. "FABC Papers 151: The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy" (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2017), no. 14.

⁵¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent' (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage, October 2022, nos. 3, 24, synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html.

⁵² General Secretariat of the Synod, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," no. 29.

⁵³ Seforosa Carroll, "Homemaking: Reclaiming the Ideal of Home as a Framework for Hosting Cultural and Religious Diversity," in *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Mark G. Brett and Jione Havea (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 219.

refers to the place and a physical, tangible structure.⁵⁴ An important element of home is that a home is a house, dwelling place, shelter, or any physical structure in which people are being housed.⁵⁵ The second framework considers home as a “process” that refers to the affective experiences of interpersonal relationships with persons one associates with feeling at home.⁵⁶ More than a place where one lives, home is also “an idea and imaginary that is imbued with both positive feelings and experiences of belonging, desire, and intimacy, as well as negative ones like violence, control, fear, and alienation.”⁵⁷ This framing makes possible the expansion of the notions and realities of home, making it a multifaceted and intersectional concept and experience. A synodal church, therefore, needs to attend and support the undertakings of women victim-survivors to envision, construct meaning, embody, and actualize structures and experiences of home as a crucial part of their recovery and flourishing.

Pope St. John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in the *Acts and Degrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* both acknowledged the family as “Church of the Home”⁵⁸ and “Church in the home”⁵⁹ respectively. Considered a domestic church, Christian families reveal and communicate the love of God.⁶⁰ Mothers and wives are identified as the “heart of the home” who, more than the fathers, are in charge of rearing children in the home.⁶¹ Although *Familiaris Consortio* is grounded in the widespread social and cultural tradition that limits women’s role to being a wife and a mother, it stresses the need to recognize the rights of women and condemn the offenses

⁵⁴ Barbara Jo McClure, “Carrying Home: Theoretical and Theological Reflections on the Politics of Attachment and Belonging,” *Pastoral Psychology* 70, no. 3 (2021): 242.

⁵⁵ Robyn M. Dowling and Alison Blunt, *Home* (Routledge, 2022), 9.

⁵⁶ McClure, “Carrying Home,” 242.

⁵⁷ Dowling and Blunt, *Home*, 9.

⁵⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 52.

⁵⁹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1992), no. 421.

⁶⁰ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 575.

⁶¹ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 578.

against their dignity. However, the church's perspectives on the true advancement for women are still tied up more to their maternal and familial roles than other public roles and professions (no. 23). *Familiaris Consortio* even insists on overcoming the mentality that acknowledges women more for their work outside the home than for their work within the family (no. 23). This makes home and homemaking highly contested themes in feminist discourses, including in theology. Some feminists would argue that the comforts and supports of home and homemaking come at the expense of the personhood and well-being of women, noting that their gendered roles and responsibilities experienced and performed at home deprive the women of support for their own identity and projects.⁶²

Despite recognizing the oppressions and privileges that the idea of home and homemaking carry historically, Iris Marion Young believes that home and homemaking still carry liberating elements and potentials because of the values they express, especially in the meaning-making endeavors that most women do in the domestic space and work.⁶³ For feminist scholar and activist bell hooks, the home place is a “space of care and nurturance” and a “site of resistance and liberation struggle” against dominating and exploitative social structures, restoring one's dignity that is denied in the public world.⁶⁴ Young emphasized that while it is important to criticize how the nostalgia of home perpetuates conditions that require women to make men and their children comfortable at their expense, it is also equally important to conceptualize the positive values of home and use them to criticize a society that is unwilling to extend these values to everyone.⁶⁵ M. Jan Holton defines home place as the “experience of one's physical, spiritual, and emotional relationship with family, biological and chosen; the physical environment, both natural and built, in which one dwells and engages in the practices of daily life; and God or

⁶² Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 134.

⁶³ Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 134.

⁶⁴ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2015), 78–79.

⁶⁵ Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 161.

the sacred.”⁶⁶ The home place is deeply connected to the sacred, inviting one to lean closer to glimpses of God.⁶⁷ In light of these critical insights from feminist scholars, the synodal vision poses a serious challenge to the church’s understanding of family/home in doctrine as well as praxis. It is imperative that the notion of home is redefined in the light of women’s experiences and their vulnerability to abuse so that all the Christian faithful can join hands in realizing the vision of synodality.

Vernacular-Postcolonial Hermeneutics of *Tabanan*

This study hopes to contribute to the deconstruction, reconstruction, and reclamation of home and homemaking in feminist theologies by utilizing Agnes Brazal’s vernacular-postcolonial hermeneutics on one of the Filipino translations of home, *tabanan*. Brazal defines vernacular-postcolonial hermeneutics as the use of local resources or categories to understand and decolonize the interpretation of the faith tradition.⁶⁸ In doing vernacular hermeneutics, the study presents *tabanan* as a spatial imaginary and home place that recognizes *pananahan ng Diyos* in the person of the abused mother and nurtures her individuation, agency, and wholeness. Moreover, from a postcolonial lens, *tabanan* also involves *pagpapataban*, which is not a silencing or denial of one’s suffering but rather the collective task of creating safe spaces for healing through the practice of “feminist collective care” that listens to silenced narratives and supports victim-survivors in the task of homemaking for and within themselves.

One of the Filipino words for home, *tabanan*, aligns with the concepts of home as a spatial imaginary and home place. As a “thing,” *tabanan*

⁶⁶ M. Jan Holton, *Longing for Home: Forced Displacement and Postures of Hospitality* (Yale University Press, 2016), 14.

⁶⁷ Holton, *Longing for Home*, 35.

⁶⁸ Agnes Brazal, “Sexuality as *Pangangatawan*: A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective,” in *Toward a Bai Theology: Catholic Feminism in the Philippines*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and Virginia Fabella (Claretian Communications Foundation, 2023), 202.

pertains to a dwelling or an abode, a house or *bahay* in Filipino.⁶⁹ On the other hand, as a “process,” *tabanan* refers not just to an ordinary habitation or dwelling place but the feeling and experience of comfort, consolation, serenity, and peace.⁷⁰ Associations of *tabanan* to these emotions and conditions stem from its root word *taban*, which has a positive connotation of “cessation” from crying,⁷¹ joking, scolding, or the like.⁷² In the Bikolano language, *tabán* is “to endure more than the another.”⁷³ *Taban* also means residing, living, or dwelling in a place, similar to the meaning of another word connected to *tabanan*, which is *pananahan*.⁷⁴ *Pananahan* is the act of living or having residence in a certain place.⁷⁵ Lastly, *naban* is a colloquial variant of *nasaan*, the Filipino translation for the interrogative where is/are.⁷⁶

Home and homemaking have been manipulated and weaponized by religion to perpetuate dehumanizing paradigms and practices against women and other marginalized groups. Examples of these are two housing ideologies: the domestic ideal and the familial ideology. The domestic ideal, which is built on the patriarchal model of assigning men to the public sphere while relegating women to the private domestic spaces, promotes home-work separation and a public-private divide that could be detrimental to women.⁷⁷ The problems emerging from this model include making the house a workplace for women, thus burdening them with homemaking and isolating them from accessing social support and

⁶⁹ *New Brainworld Dual Dictionary: English-Filipino, Filipino-English* (Children’s Press and Bindery Company, 2016), s.v. “tahanan.”

⁷⁰ Arnel Santos, “Tahan Na,” *Philippine Star Opinion*, philstar.com/opinion/2012/09/16/849511/tahan-na.

⁷¹ Santos, “Tahan Na.”

⁷² *New Filipino-Filipino with English Dictionary* (Enclare Foundation, 2007), s.v. “tahan.”

⁷³ Nathaniel Hermosa, “Mundo ang Tabanan Ko,” *Rappler*, June 12, 2012, rappler.com/moveph/6885-mundo-ang-tahanan-ko/.

⁷⁴ *New Filipino-Filipino with English Dictionary*, s.v. “tahan.”

⁷⁵ *Filipino-English Dictionary* (National Book Store, 1983), s.v. “pananahan.”

⁷⁶ *New Brainworld Dual Dictionary*.

⁷⁷ Kam Wah Chan and Patricia Kennett, *Women and Housing: An International Analysis* (Routledge, 2011), 5.

services.⁷⁸ The familial ideology, on the other hand, is based on the assumption of the “family as a unit,” which is often assumed to be the conventional heterosexual married nuclear family and traditional gender role differentiation within the unit.⁷⁹

Familiaris Consortio categorized two types of family arrangements the church needs to attend to in their various and specialized ministries: those in regular arrangements and those belonging to irregular situations (no. 65). In *Amoris Laetitia*, families in regular arrangements, which comprise a father, mother, and children, are recognized as “fruitful homes” (no. 6). The church and society should strive for the preservation of marriages, with separation being considered as the last resort and a restriction on marrying another person.⁸⁰ This category is potentially harmful to wives with abusive husbands. How much pain should the wife endure until she is freed from the abuse and violence of her husband? How long is the woman’s *pagtabán* just to keep the marriage? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza examines the kyriarchal love ethic and its disciplining practices to understand women’s continued collaboration in and their submission to domestic and sexual violence.⁸¹ While she recognized Christian theology’s work to condemn oppression, exploitation, and victimization, she brought to light the “Christian proclamation of the kyriarchal politics of submission and its attendant virtues of self-sacrifice, silence [or pseudo-*pagtaban*], docility, subservience, obedience, suffering, unconditional forgiveness, male authority, and unquestioning surrender to God’s will,” covertly advocating patriarchal practices of subjugation and victimization to be Christian.⁸² For theologies to be liberating, they have to publicly

⁷⁸ Chan and Kennett, *Women and Housing*, 5.

⁷⁹ Chan and Kennett, *Women and Housing*, 6.

⁸⁰ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 591.

⁸¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind: Domestic Violence Against Women: Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Orbis Books, 1996), 49. “Kyriarchy” is a socio-cultural-political structure of elite male-defined relationships of ruling that engenders multiple forms of oppression, such as sexism, heterosexism, classism, colonialism, racism, etc.

⁸² Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind,” 49.

condemn the institutionalized structures of heterosexist kyriarchal Christian families and church.⁸³

The church sees couples who are only civilly wed, divorced, remarried, and cohabitating as imperfectly participating in its life (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 78). Without a careful understanding of the contexts and causes of these familial conditions, this category may perpetuate a culture of exclusion and marginalization as they are labeled “imperfect” family arrangements. Women who do not belong to conventional family and marriage relationships, like those who are living alone, single mothers, elderly women, or lesbians, may not be able to enjoy full housing rights compared to other citizens.⁸⁴ Research shows that domestic violence leads to many cases of homelessness, *kawalan ng tabanan*, of women and their children. Using the feminist liberationist ethical methodology of Traci West, Laura Stivers called out the dominant ideology instilled in the individual-focused “rescue and recovery response” that connects homelessness with individual and character deficiencies, steering away from examining critically the status quo and thus leading to reforming those who are homeless.⁸⁵ This ideal image of the “good homeowner” is a heterosexual middle-class nuclear family with certain assumptions that the households are healthy and thus the foundation for economic and political independence.⁸⁶

All this precariousness, insecurity, and vulnerability encountered by women victim-survivors of domestic abuse concerning home, housing, and homemaking are mirrored in the experiences of an Old Testament character named Hagar in Genesis 16. Hagar experienced multiple and intersectional forms of oppression, including domestic abuse, in the household of Abram and Sarai. She was oppressed based on her race as an Egyptian, her class as a slave to Sarai, and her social status as a female in the

⁸³ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind,” 49.

⁸⁴ Chan and Kennett, *Women and Housing*, 6.

⁸⁵ Chan and Kennett, *Women and Housing*, 6, 54.

⁸⁶ Chan and Kennett, *Women and Housing*, 53.

patriarchal context in Israel.⁸⁷ She became homeless after being evicted from the family of Abram and Sarai, with no economic resources for survival nor protection because she was a slave without a family.⁸⁸ However, amid these dangers and difficulties, in her book *Sisters in Wilderness*, Delores Williams points out Hagar's agency, autonomy, courage, and strength. Hagar dealt with her poverty and homelessness by founding her own house or tribe.⁸⁹ Her tradition is not concerned with liberating the oppressed but with showing capacities for survival in the wilderness of racist, sexist, and classist oppression.⁹⁰ Hagar's agency and participation in her and Ishmael's survival are a fitting paradigm of the women-centered tradition that many oppressed women in the world may find relevant and appropriate.⁹¹ Hagar's example can help victim-survivors to see themselves not in terms of being victims of unjust structures but rather in terms of possessing the agency, power, and strength to confront these oppressive systems and to rely on the powerful presence of the divine that sustains and liberates them.⁹²

Patriarchy has facilitated women's internalization of disdain and alienation from their bodies. The violence inflicted on women's bodies has led to an experience of displacement, compromising how they see their dignity and worth. Hagar's homemaking journey exemplifies the *pananahan ng Diyos*, the indwelling of God in her person. While there are many ways for women victim-survivors of abuse and trauma to articulate or give voice to the power within them, women of faith most often attribute this power to the grace of God. This grace does not come as an

⁸⁷ Rasika Sharmen Pieris, "(En)Forced Displacement of Others from Their Own Land: A Feminist Theological Reading of Story of Hagar," in *Displacement and Disqualification: Asian Feminist Theological Perspectives*, ed. Mary Mee-Yin Yuen and Regina Wentzel Wolfe (Claretian Communications Foundation, 2022), 83.

⁸⁸ Pieris, "(En)Forced Displacement of Others from Their Own Land," 84–85.

⁸⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, 2013), 32.

⁹⁰ Pieris, "(En)Forced Displacement of Others from Their Own Land," 85.

⁹¹ Pieris, "(En)Forced Displacement of Others from Their Own Land," 86.

⁹² Pieris, "(En)Forced Displacement of Others from Their Own Land," 96.

external gift endowed from without. Rather, as a woman made in the image and likeness of God, women experience this grace as an internal force, belonging fully to both God and her. This truth can help women victim-survivors to see their bodies as intrinsically good and beautiful and facilitate the re-reading of our religious traditions, which passed on questionable messages about the body.⁹³ Like Hagar, women can claim the right to bodily and sexual integrity and decisions concerning their bodies.⁹⁴ Furthermore, a home place that leans into God entails naming the safe places, where a life-giving and liberating *pagtataban* or cessation of suffering takes place.⁹⁵

Women victim-survivors have lived in very unsafe home places with their families and now may have moved away from their original home places. Given that their relationships with their families have become ambivalent spaces that foster various forms of violence, and that they are now exposed to additional dangers and vulnerabilities while searching for a place to call home, the church must always remain open to journeying with them. The church is called to be a synodal church that provides spaces for the manifestation of the “*Syn-hodal* God”⁹⁶ who accompanies the afflicted in an incarnate way as modeled by Jesus and enables humans to become God’s presence in their efforts to nourish and sustain the life of all creation.⁹⁷

⁹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind,” 75.

⁹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind,” 76.

⁹⁵ Holton, *Longing for Home*, 35.

⁹⁶ Based on the etymology of the term “synodality”—derived from the Greek words *syn*, meaning “with,” and *hodos*, meaning “way”—Kochurani Abraham coined the term “Syn-hodal God” to describe a God who walks with those who are suffering and accompanies them in their struggle for justice.

⁹⁷ Kochurani Abraham, “Encountering the Syn-Hodal God: Divine Providence Beyond Patriarchal Spaces,” *Concilium* 2023, no. 3 (2023): 65, 71.

Towards a Theology of Feminist Collective Care for Battered Wives and Mothers

A theology of feminist collective care poses a challenge to a church that seeks to practice synodality, grounded in vernacular-postcolonial hermeneutics of *tabanan* and the lived and embodied experiences of both survivors and care providers.

Pagpapatahan

First, a theology of feminist collective care aims to give comfort and consolation (*pagpapatahan*). Building on feminist care principles of listening, understanding, and nurturing, in *pagpapatahan*, we recognize that there is no true comfort in the silencing or denial of the suffering of abused wives and mothers. *Pagpapatahan* requires openness to the woman who had been silenced time and again, as her story must now be received in safety. To care more about being “fair” by claiming that we need to hear the side of the abuser first or that the woman has to offer proof or justification before offering validation and care is ultimately cruel and unjust. The last thing we want to say to a woman who shares her story is, “What were you doing that provoked this man to hurt you?” or “Are you sure he did not intend to do it?” Knowing that the violence can never be justified, one does not need all the pieces of the story to offer *pagpapatahan* to a woman who has been hurt. One only needs to understand that her pain is real and that her story is sacred and demands space for expression. Individuals and communities engage in *pagpapatahan* when they listen to a woman’s cry for help, share in her anger and grief, and accompany her in her process of meaning-making, guided by an awareness of vulnerability and power within structures that seek to silence her and deny her right to safety.

Tabanan

Second, a theology of feminist collective care aims to help women rebuild a sense of home (*tabanan*). Connected to the feminist care principles of

autonomy and action plan and safety and social support, *pagpapataban* is a process that involves creating caring and safe spaces so that women suffering from trauma may once again feel a sense of *teahanan* within themselves and in the world around them. Collective care makes way for the reclamation of one's intuition, confidence, and agency in decision-making, which are all necessary parts of re-building or homemaking. There is already a growing sense among Filipino women that wife-beating is not justifiable, but the freedom to safely flee from an abusive marriage has been denied to many underprivileged women, who remain trapped in their situation because of patriarchal systems and cultures that do not offer them and their children support. A synodal church would not only provide spiritual accompaniment, offering support that alleviates the emotional, mental, and spiritual struggles many women endure, but would also share its power with other groups that can offer women the services that they need and challenge the power of the patriarchy within and outside of itself, especially in ways it had limited women's agency and safety.

Institutions that trap women in abusive marriages and limit their agency and choice, which are required for authentic love, can never truly be *tabanan*. An abused wife does not have to prove that she is at her limit or that she needs a way out of a situation that threatens her safety and well-being. Her story and life are for her to tell and shape. Any choice she makes for her children or for her own self is hers to discern and own. Her children's flourishing depends on her capacity to create a home within herself. A woman who fights for herself and her children, as she demands justice and good moral behavior from her husband, enhances and strengthens the family.⁹⁸ A theology of feminist collective care does not call for a mother's self-sacrifice but rather maintains that there should be no false separation between a woman's well-being and the well-being of her

⁹⁸ Rizza Kaye C. Cases, Manuel Victor J. Sapitula, and Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, eds., *Sexual Violence Against Women: Victim-Survivors and Faith-Based Responses* (St. Vincent School of Theology-Adamson University, 2023), 251.

family, and it is from this understanding that the rebuilding of home proceeds.

Pananahan ng Diyos

Lastly, a theology of feminist collective care challenges institutions to truly see women as *Imago Dei*. The feminist care principles of LUNAS in a synodal Church are to be guided by the recognition of *pananahan ng Diyos* or the indwelling of God within women, animating a dynamic process of meaning-making and liberation. Wives and mothers are not only *ilaw ng tabanan* (“light of the home”) but are also dwelling places of God. God is present and active through women in their individuality, relationality, vulnerability, and power. As *imago Dei*, abused mothers and wives can be like the mother bear who, roaring and with claws out, fiercely expresses her anger to protect herself and her cubs (Hosea 13:8). They can be like Sophia, who holds wisdom and power, demands listening, and brings justice, protection, and transformation (Proverbs 1:23–27; Wisdom 10:15–19).

If women, as created and beloved human beings, are also sacraments of God, how do we love, recognize, honor, and listen to the victim-survivor of violence? If we see women as *imago Dei* and sacrament, we will not force or coerce them into self-sacrifice. To do so would be an act of oppression, since any act of self-sacrifice is a conscious choice that a woman, made in the image and likeness of God, must freely and responsibly make for herself, and not out of fear of more violence either from her husband or from institutions that would punish her for daring to step out of line. To resort to victim-blaming, to sacrifice women to patriarchal gods that disguise themselves as “family stability and order,” and to knowingly limit women’s options is to fail to recognize them as *sacraments*. The sacred in-dwelling of God in her should not be desecrated by a patriarchal society that does not see women as *imago Dei* by denying them their God-given freedom to discern and live according to the movement of the Spirit within them. As *imago Dei*, the woman suffering from domestic abuse can trust her intuition and body to signal to her when she is at her limit or when she needs to create the light of *tabanan* for and within herself, where God dwells. It is from this space that

she can thrive in relationality and care for her family in the way that she discerns is needed, appropriate, and just in her context.

Conclusion

Against prevailing structural barriers and realities that devalue women, spaces that truly see women as *imago Dei* are critically needed. In such spaces, there is a true sense of *tabanan* for women, as their individuation, agency, and wholeness are nurtured and supported, and their stories are validated and listened to. The challenge before a synodal church in the making is to create safe spaces and communities of collective care for women to take their power back and make free, safe, and informed choices for themselves and their families, as they reclaim wellbeing for themselves and their children.

Truly, it is impossible to listen and accompany women and to practice synodality without seeing them as *imago Dei*, God's dwelling places, free to choose and re-create home as they define and imagine it, amidst oppressive structures that seek to silence, deny, and distort their full humanity.

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12. Third Space Ecclesia: Women Promoting Justice and Peace in Conflict Zones

Diana Therese Veloso

Women in conflict zones have experienced multiple inequalities and vulnerabilities. They also experience unique security risks and even the threat of violence on account of their gender. However, they have generated positive social change despite their circumstances. This study examines illustrative cases of their involvement in the promotion of social justice and peace in their communities, particularly in the alleviation of gender-based violence, the provision of support services for Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and the utilization of proactive responses to foster security and a culture of peace. I analyze their lived experiences and challenges through the lens of intersectional feminism and offer theological reflections on how women's involvement and advocacy work as part of the promotion of social justice and peacebuilding in the Philippines constitutes a synodal "third space."

This chapter is based on descriptive, qualitative research. The data for this chapter was culled from prior research that I conducted in conflict zones in the southern Philippines. I obtained research ethics clearance prior to engaging in field work and data collection. In addition, I coordinated with duty bearers, such as the head of the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office in Zamboanga City, the director and staff of a non-government organization in Iligan City, and staff from the evacuation centers in both Zamboanga and Iligan, prior to collecting data. I obtained informed consent from the informants.

I conducted key informant interviews with sixty-four individuals from the cities of Zamboanga and Marawi. I also interviewed duty-bearers from

both locations; some informants were both IDPs and duty-bearers.¹ Moreover, I conducted focus group discussions with 344 IDPs, including 224 people (120 parents and 104 youth) at an evacuation center and at transitory sites in Zamboanga City, and 120 people (64 parents and 56 youth) at an evacuation center and in home-based evacuation communities near the Islamic City of Marawi.

I have utilized Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which recognizes the interconnections between gender and other markers of difference, such as race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, and nationality.² These intersecting social locating factors shape the specific forms of marginalization, as well as privilege, that women experience.³ Intersectionality informs the patterns and nuances in women's lived experiences and vulnerabilities in conflict zones.⁴ Intersectional feminist theory can be used to identify gender- and culturally-sensitive, inclusive interventions about the promotion of the rights of women, as well as other gender minorities, who belong to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.⁵ Intersectional feminism informs how the women informants took part in social justice and peace initiatives in their

¹ Persons who provided services to IDPs, including employees, consultants, contractual staff, and volunteers.

² Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Unwin Hyman, 1990); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (South End Press, 2000); Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁴ Estelle Disch, ed., *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, 5th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2009); World Health Organization, "Violence Against Women," in *Beyond Borders: Thinking Critically about Global Issues*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (Worth, 2006), 120-127; Jill Radford and Elizabeth A. Stanko, "Violence Against Women and Children: The Contradictions of Crime Control Under Patriarchy," in *Women, Violence, and Male Power: Feminist Activism, Research, and Practice*, ed. Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly, and Jill Radford (Open University Press, 1996), 66-80.

⁵ Judy Root Aulette and Judith Wittner, *Gendered Worlds*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011).

communities and framed their engagements accordingly. I also utilized this lens in my theological reflections.

Contextualizing the Conflicts

Armed conflict remains a long-standing problem in certain regions in Mindanao, located in the southern Philippines. The past decades have witnessed violent attacks by armed rebel groups and/or militant Islamist groups, including: the 2013 Zamboanga Siege, perpetrated by a faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the 2017 Marawi Siege, involving the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Maute Group, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁶ The conflicts have led to the loss of lives, the destruction of property and infrastructure, and the displacement of numerous civilians, who are predominantly from racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in Philippine society.⁷

Before discussing the role of women in the promotion of justice and peace in conflict zones in the Philippines, it is necessary to discuss the underlying factors behind the long-standing ethnic and religious conflict in particular provinces in Mindanao. The conflict in Mindanao stems from complex historical, socio-economic, and political factors that led to the growth of the Muslim separatist movement, armed struggle, and

⁶ Amnesty International, "Philippines: 'Battle of Marawi' Leaves Trail of Death and Destruction," [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/philippines-battle-of-marawi-leaves-trail-of-death-and-destruction](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/philippines-battle-of-marawi-leaves-trail-of-death-and-destruction); Carmela Fonbuena, "Terror in Mindanao: The Mautes of Marawi," *Rappler*, June 26, 2017, [rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/terrorism-mindanao-maute-family-marawi-city](https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/terrorism-mindanao-maute-family-marawi-city).

⁷ Patty Paison, "Marawi Evacuees Undergo Stress Debriefing, Play Therapy," *Rappler*, June 8, 2017, [rappler.com/nation/172341-marawi-evacuees-stress-debriefing-play-therapy](https://www.rappler.com/nation/172341-marawi-evacuees-stress-debriefing-play-therapy); and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Philippines: Revision of the Zamboanga Action Plan," reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-zamboanga-action-plan-2014-revision.

extremism.⁸ The Moros⁹ have deep-seated grievances toward the colonial and postwar government administrations regarding the deprivation of their right to self-determination and equitable access to resources in their ancestral domain.¹⁰

Muslims comprise 5 percent of the Philippine population and are concentrated in Mindanao, where Islam was first introduced in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, until the advent of colonialism.¹¹ Muslims resisted Spanish conquest, but fell under American sovereignty.¹² When the United States made Mindanao part of an independent Philippines in 1946, the majority of Muslims felt betrayed, as they did not consider themselves Filipinos, and retained their distinct religious and cultural identity as the Bangsamoro.¹³ Hostilities between Muslims and

⁸ Randolph S. David, *Nation, Self, and Citizenship: An Invitation to Philippine Sociology* (Anvil, 2004); and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "The US, the War on Terror and Mindanao," in *The US and the War on Terror in the Philippines*, ed. Patricio N. Abinales and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo (Anvil, 2008), 1–12.

⁹ The Spaniards used the term "Moros," based on a Latin name for the inhabitants of the Roman province of Mauretania in North Africa, to refer to all Muslims, which gave rise to the term "Moors." It often had the connotation of "foreigner." Muslims in the Philippines reclaimed this label to refer to courageous, unconquered people; see Benedicto R. Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines* (US Institute of Peace, 2005).

¹⁰ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Anvil, 2005); Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks*; and Eric Gutierrez and Saturnino Borrás, Jr., *The Moro Conflict: Landlessness and Misdirected State Policies* (East-West Center, 2004), files.ethz.ch/isn/26100/PS008.pdf.

¹¹ The Muslim community comprises about thirteen ethnolinguistic groups, distinguished on the basis of language, in the Philippines; see Asian Development Bank, "Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Philippines," adb.org/publications/series/indigenous-peoples-ethnic-minorities-and-poverty-reduction; Bacani, *Mindanao Peace Talks*.

¹² Bacani, *Mindanao Peace Talks*; and Cesar Adib Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Mizan Press, 1985).

¹³ The Bangsamoro, which means "separate nation," includes Muslim ethnic groups that historically resisted colonization and considered themselves as a citizenry separate from but equal to Filipinos. Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*; and R.J. May, "The Wild West in the South: A Recent Political History of Mindanao," in *Mindanao*:

Christians persisted due to the tendency of Filipino national leaders to disregard Muslims and their lands and to employ the same exploitative practices used by the Spanish and American authorities—a form of internal colonialism. This is reflected in the government-sponsored migration of Christian settlers to Mindanao, which displaced Muslims and indigenous people from their land. Events in the 1960s and 1970s further alienated the Muslim community, particularly: the 1968 Jabidah Massacre, wherein the military executed Muslim trainees on Corregidor Island after they allegedly launched a mutiny due to unpaid services while training for secret operations to invade Sabah; clashes between Muslims and Christians; and the loss of Muslim communal lands to Christian settlers.¹⁴

In the 1960s, a national separatist movement among Muslims emerged. Foremost in this struggle was the MNLF.¹⁵ Led by Nur Misuari, the organization initially fought for independence, but signed a peace agreement with the government in 1996 and settled for the autonomy of selected provinces in Mindanao.¹⁶ Militant breakaway factions emerged, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), established in 1978 by

Land of Unfulfilled Promise, ed. Mark Turner, R. J. May, and Lulu R. Turner (New Day Publishers, 1992), 125–146.

¹⁴ Sylvia Concepcion, Larry Dical, Rufa Guiam, Romulo Dela Rosa, and Mara Stankovitch, *Breaking the Links Between Economics and Conflict in Mindanao* (International Alert, 2003); Glenda Gloria, “Jabidah and Merdeka: The Inside Story,” *Rappler*, March 18, 2018, rappler.com/newsbreak/jabidah-massacre-merdeka-sabah; HURIGHTS Osaka, “Mindanao Conflict: In Search of Peace and Human Rights,” *FOCUS* 54 (2008): 2-4; Christos Iacovou, “From MNLF to Abu Sayyaf: The Radicalization of Islam in the Philippines,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, July 11, 2000, ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=133; and Jocelyn Uy, “Jabidah Massacre’s Survivor Would Rather Forget,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 19, 2008, newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20080319-125597/Jabidah-massacres-survivor-would-rather-forget.

¹⁵ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*; and May, “The Wild West in the South.”

¹⁶ Patricio N. Abinales, *The Joys of Dislocation: Mindanao, Nation, and Region* (Anvil, 2008); Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*; and Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (University of California Press, 1998).

Salamat Hashim, who favored independence rather than autonomy.¹⁷ Peace negotiations began in 1997, but got stalled.¹⁸ The final peace agreement between the government and the MILF was signed in March 2014.¹⁹ With the evolution of the separatist movement, divisions exist between organizations receptive or resistant to dialogue with the government.²⁰ This has led to the intensification of armed conflict in Mindanao. The Zamboanga Siege occurred on September 9, 2013, and continued for nearly a month, affecting coastal villages. Sources reveal that ISIS regarded Marawi City as a potential *wilaya* (province) as part of its plans to establish a caliphate.²¹ These conflicts displaced numerous civilians. In Zamboanga, many IDPs experienced prolonged stays in traditional evacuation centers, as well as in transitory sites or other temporary housing.²² As for IDPs from Marawi, who largely opted for home-based evacuation arrangements, they were not allowed to enter their homes for extended periods.²³ Gendered violence and lawlessness were

¹⁷ “Guide to the Philippines conflict,” *BBC News*, October 28, 2012, bbc.com/news/world-asia-17038024; HURIGHTS Osaka, “Mindanao Conflict.”

¹⁸ Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks*; Jeo Angelo Chico Elamparo, “Gov’t–MILF Peace Talks Timeline,” *ABS-CBN News*, January 25, 2014, news.abs-cbn.com/focus/01/25/14/govt-milf-peace-talks-timeline-0.

¹⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “The Philippines Case Study: Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/philippines; and Christian V. Esguerra and T.J. Burgonio, “Philippines, MILF Sign Peace Agreement,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 28, 2014, newsinfo.inquirer.net/589706/bangsamoro-rising.

²⁰ Banlaoi, “The Sources of the Abu Sayyaf’s Resilience in the Southern Philippines”; Iacovou, “From MNLF to Abu Sayyaf”; and McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*.

²¹ Hincks, “ISIS in the Philippines.”

²² Rey-Luis Banagudos, “How Muslim Women Deal with Pain, Trauma 5 Years after Zamboanga Siege,” *Philippine News Agency*, September 11, 2018, pna.gov.ph/articles/1047654; Bong Garcia, “NHA Rushes Completion of Zamboanga Siege Victims’ Houses,” *Sun Star Philippines*, September 14, 2017, sunstar.com.ph/article/164123/Business/NHA-rushes-completion-of-Zamboanga-siege-victims-houses; and Bong Garcia, “Zamboanga City Commemorates 4th Anniversary of Siege,” *Sun Star Philippines*, September 8, 2017, sunstar.com.ph/article/163101/Business/Zamboanga-City-commemorates-4th-anniversary-of-siege.

²³ Ellie Aben, “‘We Want Our Homes Back’: Marawi Residents’ Plea to Philippines’ President Duterte,” *Arab News*, May 24, 2018, arabnews.com/node/1309161/; United Nations High

prevalent during conflict and post-conflict situations. These trends provide a frame for assessing the role of women in fostering justice and peace in conflict zones in Mindanao.

The Role of Women in the Promotion of Justice and Peace

In my research, women played instrumental roles in promoting social justice and peace during and after the conflict in Zamboanga and Marawi. Some informants contributed to the alleviation of gender-based violence and provided other support services for IDPs. Others responded to security concerns and served as agents of peace-building. Some duty-bearers promoted intercultural sensitivity and the empowerment of IDPs.

Alleviating Gender-Based Violence

Some women, despite the ordeal of armed conflict and displacement, extended assistance to fellow IDPs, particularly those who had experienced gender-based violence (GBV). The women played a crucial role in educating fellow IDPs about their rights and in alleviating GBV at the grassroots level.

Several women in Zamboanga demonstrated their commitment to ending gendered violence. One of them is Carmelita,²⁴ a middle-aged woman of Visayan and Waray descent, who served as a Peacekeeper before becoming a facilitator at the Women-Friendly Space (WFS) at the Grandstand,²⁵ as part of an initiative set up by the Department of Social

Commissioner for Refugees, “Marawi Update: The Last of the Evacuation Centers,” unhcr.org/ph/17719-feb2020-enews-marawi.html; and Ashley Westerman, “Over 120,000 People Remain Displaced 3 Years After Philippines’ Marawi Battle,” *NPR*, October 23, 2020, npr.org/2020/10/23/925316298/over-120-000-people-remain-displaced-3-years-after-philippines-marawi-battle.

²⁴ Names of informants have been changed to protect their privacy.

²⁵ The Grandstand is the monicker that locals use to refer to the Joaquin F. Enriquez Sports Complex in Zamboanga City. It was the major evacuation center and housed up to 118,000 IDPs for a time. See Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Philippines: Zamboanga Action Plan 2014 (Revision),” unocha.org/publications/report/philippines/philippines-zamboanga-action-plan-2014-revision.

Welfare and Development. When I first met her, she was in the midst of giving a lecture on the different types of abuse to women IDPs, who were predominantly from Muslim ethnic groups. I later learned that she herself was a survivor of GBV, until her separation from her estranged husband before the siege. She provided counseling for survivors, some of whom visited her tent late at night after yet another episode of abuse. She also helped investigate GBV cases at the Grandstand. She voiced her misgivings about how some survivors withdrew the charges once they learned that their partners would be put in jail, or returned to their abusers after all the interventions that she and other duty-bearers exerted. But she also respected their decision. Even after relocating to a faith-based transitory site, she occasionally visited the Grandstand to check on some survivors, who considered her a trusted confidante. Two of the GBV survivors I interviewed confirmed this and expressed their appreciation for the assistance she provided. Carmelita subsequently worked at the WFS of a government-funded transitory site for some time but discontinued this due to the long, expensive commute. At her new community, she was likewise part of the support system of other IDPs, some of whom had been used by the rebels as human shields during the siege and remained traumatized. She also served as an advocate for abused children and youth.

Another advocate is Faisah, a middle-aged Tausug woman and parent-leader at the Grandstand. Her drug-addicted brother-in-law abused his wife, who attempted suicide. Faisah recalled: "My sister-in-law drank poison. She poisoned herself because she was always being beaten up. It's like she just wanted it to end . . . Her mouth foamed over. Good thing she didn't drink much of it." Her sister-in-law was brought to the hospital and survived. She and other duty-bearers had already documented prior episodes of abuse and thus had her brother-in-law banned from the Grandstand. They assisted her sister-in-law in returning to her native Sulu.

Due diligence was also essential in determining the authenticity of claims regarding gendered violence. Hadja Mariam, a Tausug woman in her mid-40s and Peacekeeper at a transitory site for IDPs, demonstrated this. She and another Peacekeeper investigated a woman's allegations of

domestic violence and discovered that she abused her husband physically and verbally, but reported him as the aggressor when he retaliated.

The informants' narratives illustrate how women's empowerment is crucial. Rania, a middle-aged Sama-Badjao community leader and teacher at a school set up by a foundation for Sama-Badjao students, disclosed: "I'm convinced that whatever men can do, women can also do. Women have to be taught that." She added that some women were so dependent on their husbands for their financial and economic support, to the point of fearing separation despite being abused: "They're not empowered." She took it upon herself to remind women of their capabilities.

Empowerment gets translated to women's newfound awareness of their rights. Yasmin, a Tausug mother in her twenties, related the impact of attending seminars on gendered violence at the Grandstand: "I learned that we, as women, have rights after all. I didn't know that before." Some women thus moved from being a powerless victim to an agentic survivor. The experience of Salima, a Sama-Badjao community leader in her forties and a mother of five children, is a case in point. She had experienced physical violence, verbal abuse, and marital rape at the hands of her estranged husband when they resided at the Grandstand. She found the courage to separate from her husband, despite how her culture expected women to remain with abusive partners. Due to unequal divorce laws for Muslim women, only men could file for divorce. Salima demanded that her husband divorce her, lest she charge him with violating the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children law. This led her divorce to be granted. She claimed that she was the first woman—if not, one of the first women—in the Sama-Badjao community who divorced her abusive husband, and that she set a precedent for other women in her ethnic group who were trapped in and struggling with abusive marriages.

Providing Support Services for IDPs

Some informants, who were impacted by the Marawi siege in terms of losing their home and/or being displaced from their work, extended assistance to other displaced people. For instance, Parisa, a middle-aged

Maranao woman who worked as a guidance counselor, assisted in providing counseling and other mental health services for IDPs. When I met her, she had just accompanied a family to a hospital due to the nervous breakdown suffered by two sisters who were residing at an evacuation center. Parisa was also displaced and shared an apartment with many relatives, shouldering the bulk of their living expenses, as she was one of the few employed people in their household.

Due to the specific risks confronting Christians, Estella, a Visayan woman in her thirties and a faculty member at Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi, immediately evacuated from her dormitory to the nearby city of Iligan, where she rented a studio apartment with a friend. She and her roommate also shared their apartment with another displaced family and their domestic helpers during the siege. Despite the disruptions in her living and work situation, she volunteered with a mental health and psychosocial support group that was co-founded by her colleague and assisted in providing psycho-social services for students and professionals affected by the siege.

Amira, a Maranao woman in her mid-thirties and a faculty member and administrator at MSU, identified as economically displaced. She still taught using alternative arrangements and continued with her graduate studies at the state university's campus in Iligan City. She visited her displaced relatives at a nearby municipality and provided for their economic needs. She also assisted in providing stress debriefing for IDPs. Many other women informants, including other faculty members at MSU and/or students, had experienced the destruction of or damage to their homes and/or economic displacement but continued to volunteer with the aforementioned support group, which served at least five thousand people during the siege and has since become a non-government organization.

Responding to Security Concerns and Peace-Building Initiatives

Some women informants encountered and responded to multiple gendered security risks during the siege. Three sisters were held hostage and used as human shields by the MNLF rebels during the Zamboanga siege.

They encouraged their companions to stay calm until their life-threatening situation would pass. They also remained civil toward the rebels to avoid amplifying tensions.

Other informants, who were mothers, responded proactively to at-risk situations affecting their daughters. Carmelita and Marlina, a middle-aged Peacekeeper of Waray descent, accompanied their daughters to the public toilets at the Grandstand to protect them from sexual harassment. Carmelita also chased after a thief who broke into her tent, although she tripped during the scuffle and suffered bruises. Her daughter applied for a vaguely-defined job that required computer skills, shortly before the Marawi siege, and she instructed another daughter to tag along during the meeting with women recruiters. It turned out that the recruiters lived near Marawi and inquired about applicants' willingness to travel. Upon receiving a text message from her daughters, Carmelita grew alarmed. She suspected that the recruiters were Islamists. True to form, some informants who had been displaced by the Marawi siege confirmed that some Islamist women were fronts for the Maute group.

Some women from Marawi shared their vulnerability to gendered violence and militarism. They narrated multiple experiences of actual or attempted violence due to their gender or secondary violence due to their ties with family members or relatives. For instance, Maha, a middle-aged woman of Maranao and Visayan descent and a faculty member at MSU, was stopped by ISIS fighters at gunpoint while she was evacuating with her young children and had to recite Islamic teachings to avoid being shot. Despite being four months pregnant, she and her children were made to lie face-down on the ground, and she helped them calm down, even as one soldier was shot several feet from them. She experienced verbal abuse and harassment at gunpoint by Islamophobic military personnel, who were sent to rescue them from a gasoline station where she and others had hidden and who called attention to her "costume"—that is, her long, black dress, which she wore as a Muslimah who had completed *hajj*; she did not take his disparaging remarks lightly and called him out on expected military decorum toward civilians.

Other women informants were instrumental in protecting and ensuring the safety of their family members and other significant networks. Daria, a Maranao woman in her twenties, outwitted ISIS members by offering them socks and other provisions to ensure that her husband would not be taken and forced to fight with them. Asma, a single Maranao woman in her thirties, related how she ensured the safety of everyone in the Office of the Mayor, where she worked, when the Marawi Siege broke out; this included then-Mayor Majul Gandamra, a highly-valued target, and her pregnant sister. Some ISIS fighters stopped her while she was driving home the following day, but she stayed calm so as to get home safely and assist her other family members in preparing to evacuate; their home was immediately destroyed by airstrikes. Despite this, she volunteered with the same support group with which many other informants from MSU got involved.

Lanika, a middle-aged Maranao woman and faculty member and administrator at MSU, was stranded on campus, along with her husband, when the siege broke out. She instructed her daughters to hide her sons, whose gender and age made them prime targets for forced membership in ISIS. When she went to rescue her children and her elderly mother at their home in Marawi the following day, ISIS fighters were patrolling their street. She instructed her husband to remain in their vehicle and politely asked the fighters for permission to fetch her mother. She guarded her mother and her sons when they left their home, which was destroyed afterward.

The informants acknowledged and even exemplified the instrumental role of women in peace-building in their communities. Zainab, a Maranao woman in her thirties, mentioned that women in Muslim ethnic groups were relied upon to resolve conflict, such as animosities between warring families and clans. Their role in peace negotiations was framed as essential to prevent the escalation of violence through *rido* (clan feud), as it impacted Muslim ethnic groups in the Philippines. Other informants helped generate awareness about issues relating to peace and conflict. Estella once hosted a panel discussion about the root causes of armed

conflict and extremism in Mindanao and the contributions of academics. For her part, Lanika authored a book containing people's memoirs of the Marawi Siege. She also serves as the anchor in a radio program that addresses the issues of IDPs. She has written extensively about the root causes of armed conflict and extremism in Mindanao conflict and other peacebuilding issues in her newspaper column. As a development communication practitioner and educator, she trained students to use media and communication to raise awareness about vulnerable communities in Mindanao and to promote peace and development.

Some women demonstrated cultural sensitivity in their interactions with and services for IDPs. The executive director and program staff of a non-governmental organization, who were Visayan and thus affiliated with a predominantly Christian ethno-linguistic group, incorporated pertinent cultural and religious norms in their interventions for survivors of the Marawi siege, who were predominantly Muslims from the Maranao ethnic group. The executive director emphasized how they prioritized livelihood projects for displaced people, given the cultural propensity of Maranaos to engage in trade-related activities, regardless of socio-economic status and educational attainment. She claimed that this approach was more feasible than simply giving dole-outs to those in evacuation centers. The staff members who connected me to the communities they served and even accompanied me during my fieldwork also exemplified cultural sensitivity in their assessment of the necessary approaches in providing assistance to Maranao IDPs. Their rapport with their beneficiaries was noticeable, so much so that an employee of the Department of Social Welfare and observed that the IDPs in an evacuation center were eager upon hearing about the visits of the said organization but were more difficult to convene otherwise.

Tanya, a Visayan informant in her thirties, took her notion of cultural sensitivity a step further when she disclosed her close affinity with the Maranao community. While she acknowledged her upbringing in a predominantly Christian community and her exposure to the norms of her ethnolinguistic group, she asserted: "Culturally, I'm Maranao."

Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Women's Role in Conflict Resolution

Intersectionality theory—and indeed, intersectional feminist theory—highlights the links between gender and other social locating factors, such as race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, and nationality, in shaping people's experiences of oppression and privilege.²⁶ Analyzing the lived experiences of the informants illustrates how their intersecting identities shaped their vulnerabilities and even their access to safety nets and support systems in times of displacement. It was common for the informants in both Zamboanga and Marawi to experience the risk of gender-based victimization, coupled with Islamophobia and racism against ethnic groups affiliated with the Muslim community. In terms of their post-displacement living situation, their gender, ethnic group, religion, and social class impacted their options and the roles and expectations ascribed to them.

For IDPs from Zamboanga, who were low-income, informal settlers from predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, as well as some Christian ethnic groups that had often intermarried into the Muslim community, their only options were to stay at the Grandstand or to live with relatives willing to host them. For those displaced by the Marawi siege, Maranao cultural norms, such as *marbatabat* (honor, in the context of both individual honor and family or clan-based honor), prevented individuals from letting their relatives and other significant networks stay in evacuation centers. Despite their own experience of displacement, they often felt compelled to accommodate and support these relatives because it would have been seen as shameful for them to let their family members or kin endure the living conditions at evacuation centers, causing a strain on their living situation and resources. For others, having an alternative residence near Marawi was an invaluable resource during the siege but also

²⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; hooks, *Feminist Theory*; Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010).

led to the possibility that their networks would appropriate the same resource.

Intersectionality theory as well as intersectional feminist theory informs how the informants framed their involvement in social justice and peace initiatives in their communities. Some women informants invoked gendered roles, such as being a mother, a wife, a daughter, a niece, and so on, and relational considerations and dynamics, consistent with the traditional gender socialization of Filipina women, in describing how they handled multiple challenges and responsibilities in conflict-ridden environments. This illustrates how the women's survival strategies and coping mechanisms in times of displacement cannot be isolated from their relational roles in their families and communities. Others alluded to gender-specific concerns in religious and ethnic minority communities, such as the need to counter religious and cultural norms that normalize women's inequality and victimization. This has implications for interventions for minority women through the prism of intersectional feminism.

At the same time, there were women informants who highlighted not so much their gender as their ethnicity, religion, social class, and educational background, among others. This illustrates how gender as a marker of one's identity may be subsumed under other interrelated social locating factors, and how the articulation of concerns regarding women's empowerment invariably intersects with broader issues relating to social justice and peace-building.

Whether or not the informants explicitly identified with intersectional feminist concerns, their recognition of the underlying causes of armed conflict and extremism in Mindanao stands out. This is aligned with Juergensmeyer's (2017) cultural perspective on religious extremism, which highlights how contemporary acts of religious violence are often justified by the historical precedent of religion's violent past and stem from people's

cultural contexts and global social and political changes.²⁷ Distinctive world views and moral justifications of religious militant activists inform the ideas and communities of support behind acts of violence, rather than the so-called “terrorists” who commit them. This applies to the way some informants framed the motives and actions of the MNLF faction that perpetuated the Zamboanga siege and the Islamist militancy of the Maute Group, as well as the Abu Sayyaf Group, in perpetuating the Marawi siege. This can be used to examine the likelihood of sympathizing with armed opposition groups and religious militants in the Philippine context. The informants from both Zamboanga and Marawi were clear about the need to address this issue to avert the threat of another siege—and the risk of enabling a new generation of extremists.

Theological Underpinnings of Women as ‘Third Space Ecclesia’ in Conflict Zones

The lived experiences of my informants as much-needed instruments of justice and peace in conflict-ridden communities in Mindanao has implications for the role of women as “third space ecclesia” in conflict zones. In my theological reflections, I draw upon insights from different sources, such as biblical women and the lessons learned from their example, intersectional theology, synodal documents, and feminist theology on conflict resolution.

Lessons from Biblical Women

The narratives of the women in my research are aligned with the examples of wise, powerful women in the Old Testament of the Bible, such as Deborah, Judith, and Esther. These biblical women intervened in conflict situations and protected their people despite the considerable risks involved and the comparatively more dependent and/or disfranchised status of women during their time(s). This is a testament to women’s

²⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 4th ed. (University of California Press, 2017).

strength and agency in resisting oppression and promoting justice and peace despite the constraints of patriarchy and other overlapping inequalities.

Deborah, whose story is told in the Book of Judges, was a prophetess and judge during a conflict-ridden period in the history of Israel. She ruled with courage and decisiveness, and her leadership resulted in unity and peace in Israel for forty years. Judith, whose story is narrated in the Book of Judith, was a Jewish widow who lived in Israel post-exile, at a time when her people remained under the control of Persia. She was assertive in her dealings with the men who ruled the city and successfully outsmarted a general who was an adversary—and even beheaded him in the camp of the enemy forces.²⁸ Esther, whose story appears in the Book of Esther, was a queen, who was of Jewish descent and came from humble beginnings. She lived in an age when women experienced sheer objectification—even those in leadership positions—and could easily be deposed for defying their spouses, as was the case of Queen Vashti, who defied the orders of King Ahasuerus for her to appear and be “looked at”—a metaphor for being viewed naked—by his guests.²⁹ While Esther’s selection as the new queen was influenced by patriarchal structures and practices, this served as the means for her to save her people. She foiled a plot that would have resulted in the genocide of the Jews.³⁰ All these women challenged prevailing patriarchal views that favored men’s leadership and interests—and their involvement in aggression and violence.

A feminist theological reading of the stories of these women reveals the role of women as peacemakers, negotiators, and leaders in situations characterized by conflict and strife. This parallels the experiences of the

²⁸ Hanna Muldowney, “Judith: A Portrait of the Value of Women in the Church,” *St. John Vianney Lay Division*, September 13, 2019, sjvlaydivision.org/judith.

²⁹ Sidnie White Crawford, “Esther,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (John Knox Press, 2012).

³⁰ Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding from a Religious Perspective* (IRCE, 2021), kirkensnodhjelp.no/sites/default/files/2024-10/2942-112022a-a5-nca-rowipb-magazine-design-final-edited-13-feb.pdf.

women in my research, who engaged in creative problem-solving and agentic decision-making in the face of danger and conflict. In the biblical era as well as in contemporary society, women and girls remain largely oppressed. Their gender intersects with other social locating factors, such as their sexuality, their age, their social class, and their ethnicity, among others, to create specific forms of power and powerlessness, which influence their vulnerability to abuse but also their agency in the face of structural oppressions. A common theme in the narratives of these biblical women and the women in my research lies in the role of women as “third spaces” in conflict situations. This is a powerful testament of the synodal third space that the church is called—and challenged—to emulate.

Intersectional Theology and the Promotion of Justice and Peace

Intersectional theology recognizes interconnected structural inequalities relating to gender, race, social class, and other markers of difference. It also fleshes out the role of religion in perpetuating injustice.³¹ This has implications for the involvement of women in peace and justice causes in conflict zones in the Philippines, as well as for the assessment of the situation of IDPs, who are marginalized on multiple levels and have complex needs that should be understood through a gender and culturally sensitive lens.

Entrenched sexism, racism, classism, religious discrimination, and other forms of systemic marginalization have historically affected people’s socialization and corresponding world views.³² Social norms that perpetuate or resist these intersecting inequalities have been—deliberately or otherwise—historically incorporated in religious settings, as well as other institutions that influence and are influenced by religion. Gender and cultural dynamics, including those that normalize unequal relations and statuses, are likely to shape religious and cultural practices and manifestations thereof in social life, which are often normalized and

³¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Fortress Press, 2018).

³² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; hooks, *Feminist Theory*; Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*.

construed as part of personal and collective identities. Internalized oppression is another crucial issue, in that there are women and other gender minorities—particularly those who come from communities consisting of cultural and religious minorities—who either downplay or rationalize the experience of subordination, seeing themselves and/or their respective group or community as deserving of it.

Cultural norms and religious practices may either promote or constrain women's involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives in the Philippine context. Social and pastoral interventions for IDPs should incorporate intersectionality in their practices. A patronizing approach, built on the assumption of "Christians saving Muslims," would intensify existing tensions, given the deep-seated grievances of Muslims due to their history of postwar oppression and forcible inclusion into the Philippines as a newly independent nation. Theological and pastoral responses to social justice and peace-building in conflict zones should incorporate interreligious engagement and gender and cultural sensitivity, to promote genuine reconciliation and healing.

Through the lens of intersectional feminist theology, one can grasp to what extent women's contributions to justice and peacebuilding are undervalued in the Philippine context due to the country's patriarchal structure as a result of colonialism—a far cry from the way precolonial society revered women's (and women-identifying people, regardless of assigned sex at birth) sacred role as *babaylan* (priestess and shaman/healer). At the same time, the specific concerns and even the experiences of historical injustice of ethnic and religious minorities in the Philippines—which inform the context of women's justice and peacebuilding initiatives in conflict zones—often receive limited attention. These are crucial concerns that need to be addressed and resolved, in the spirit of synodality. It is hoped that the effort to build a synodal church, which has focused on the theme of "Communion, Participation, and Mission," would provide the space for the healing of age-old wounds and injustices. This healing is aligned with women's involvement in social justice and peacebuilding activities in conflict zones in the Philippines.

Expanding the Reach of Synodality

Women’s involvement in justice and peace initiatives in conflict zones in the southern Philippines illustrates the extent to which they address crucial services and needs impacting people in underserved, at-risk communities—the same communities that the church should pay closer attention to as part of the goals of synodality. At times, their advocacies and ministries remain overlooked or seen as an extension of their other responsibilities—even if they practically do everything for others. Yet their work—be it visible or invisible—makes a profound difference in society and constitutes a synodal “third space” consisting of new approaches, stakeholders, and duty-bearers to solve persisting, age-old problems.

The 2024 Vatican Synod highlights the ongoing need to listen to multiple marginalized voices as part of deepening and amplifying the ministry and service of the Catholic Church. As mentioned in the *Vademecum*, which is intended to be a handbook to complement and to be utilized in conjunction with the *Preparatory Document* at the service of the synodal process: “Pope Francis is calling the Church to rediscover its deeply synodal nature. This rediscovery of the synodal roots of the Church will involve a process of humbly learning together how God is calling us to be as the Church in the third millennium.”³³ As such, the Synod on Synodality entails the promotion of inclusivity, listening to the “other” and the incorporation of perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups, including those represented by the women in this research, as well as the communities they serve.

The inter-continental synodal document titled “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” puts forth the metaphor of a tent to articulate the values of synodality. True to form, the document frames the synodal tent as “a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a foundation for *mission*.”³⁴

³³ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), no. 7, synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

³⁴ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” nos. 8, 21–22, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf. Emphasis in original.

The synodal journey entails listening to the people of God and recommends salient approaches, including: the adoption of an inclusive, welcoming approach to the act of listening; dialogue with adherents of other religious and faith traditions; a participatory outlook; concrete practices that bring communion, participation, and mission to fruition; and incorporation of these ideals in liturgy. As stated: “The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process.”³⁵ As numerous communities recognize that synodality presents invaluable opportunities to listen to diverse groups who feel alienated and excluded from the church, the document makes the case that: “In this journey, the Churches have realized that the path to greater inclusion—the enlarged tent—is a gradual one. It begins with listening and requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniment; it begins in a readiness to recognize that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice.”³⁶

The women in my research embody these values and ideals in the promotion of justice and peace in conflict zones. In their involvement in initiatives to eradicate gender-based violence, promote security and ensure the well-being of IDPs despite their own vulnerabilities and to promote cultural and gender sensitivity, their praxis is a way of engaging in the mission of the church—regardless of whether or not they are Catholic or Christian. It even demonstrates the capacity to promote interfaith solidarity. This provides a much-needed safe, synodal third space. Through their advocacies and praxis, they exemplify new ways of being church, across the boundaries of gender and religion.

As a disclaimer, this reflection does not intend to promote essentialist gender stereotypes, such as men’s involvement in aggression and fighting

³⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” no. 21.

³⁶ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” nos. 22, 24.

and women's promotion of relational concerns and peacebuilding. However, it is important that women in conflict zones in Mindanao convey powerful, inspiring messages in their justice and peace praxis. Instead of conforming to patriarchal stereotypes such as their passivity, helplessness, and subordination, the women in my research demonstrate agency—be it in a spiritual or relational sense—to bring healing to communities and regions characterized by animosity, hatred, and bloodshed, and to contribute to peace-building. They take a proactive stance towards the promotion of justice and peace in the sense of demanding accountability, rather than avoiding confrontation and/or sweeping deep-seated inequities under the rug.

The people of God form the heart of the church, beyond a structural or institutional sense—and indeed, beyond the place(s) of worship in a physical sense. Women's involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives, where they bridge boundaries relating to social class, religious identity, race and ethnicity, political positions, and other social locating factors, plays a crucial role in building community and bringing peace and justice to conflict-ridden areas. This forms part of the journey of the people of God as they work together to proclaim Gospel values and build life-giving communities, which is at the heart of synodality. Women's peace-building and social justice initiatives in conflict zones reflect the essence of journeying together across different social backgrounds and positions. This concretely shows to what extent “walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God” (*Preparatory Document*, no. 1). The inclusion of women's perspectives in promoting social justice and peacebuilding in their communities contributes to the mission of the church in building a synodal third space for women, where minority perspectives and marginalized voices, in particular, can be heard and listened to, as part of recognizing their role and inclusion in the church.

Conclusion

Women in conflict zones have experienced multiple forms of inequality and victimization and remain vulnerable to violence. Yet their narratives show that they have demonstrated agency through their involvement in social justice and peace-building initiatives in their communities, such as the alleviation of gender-based violence, the provision of support services for IDPs, and the utilization of proactive responses to ensure security and foster a culture of peace.

The involvement of women in promoting peace and justice in conflict zones in the southern Philippines, where they exercise agency in the face of structural oppressions and inequities, is fulfilling the authentic mission of the church, thus serving as a third space ecclesia in the spirit of synodality. The narratives of my informants show that their justice and peacebuilding initiatives and advocacies as women—and indeed, their very presence in conflict-ridden communities—is enacting the mission of the church by simply being church, regardless of religious and faith traditions. They demonstrate the essence of being ecclesia as a synodal third space. In so doing, they serve as agents of liberation, rather than conforming to the gender stereotype of women being enslaved and subordinated. Women’s agency in building peace and justice in conflict zones is a realization of ecclesia as a synodal third space.

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