

Laylayan Theology: Listening to the Voices from the Margins

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Abstract: This paper aims to introduce and argue the need for Laylayan theology. It theologizes a Filipino cultural concept that has been appropriated to describe the people from the margins. In this paper, the invaluable contributions of indigenous Christian youths, the basic ecclesial communities, and *bai* to the Christian faith and mission were described. Laylayan theology hopes to promote further reflections and discourse towards prophetic dialogue between Christians from the margins and other members of society.

Keywords: contextual; cultural; Filipino; appropriation; Christianity; lived experience

1. Introduction

Jesus Christ, in the *Parable of the Sower*, taught that the word of God is like seeds that are sown and settled on different types of soil (New Bible English, 2010). People who accept, retain, and persevere with the "seed" are like "good soil." They allow the word of God to "bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (Mark 4: 20). In 1521, a small group of indigenous peoples from Cebu, Philippines, received the seed of Christianity from Spanish colonizers and Catholic missionaries (Pigafetta, 1969). The country in Southeast Asia proved to be a fertile ground for the Christian faith. Among 109 million Filipinos, around 80% are Catholics, and 11% belong to other Christian denominations (World Trade Press, 2010). Although other major religions such as Islam and Chinese Buddhism are present, Christianity dominates the religious landscape in the country (Pew-Templeton, 2020). Currently, Christian cosmologies and expressions permeate many Filipinos' lifeworld and socio-cultural norms (Macaraan, 2019). After five hundred years, Christianity has flourished and become embedded in Philippine society and culture (del Castillo, 2021).

The quincentenary of Christianity in the Philippines is a milestone for the Church. It is also an opportune time to re-discover and critically reflect upon notions. For Christians in the modern world, their vocation is to amplify further the voices of the people from the margins of society. In the World Day of Migrants, Pope Francis (2021) called for a more inclusive church that goes out to the peripheries. The challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumerism, global and national politics, and other emerging societal issues affect the people, especially the poor, the vulnerable, and those in the "laylayan." In the Philippines, *laylayan* is a Filipino term that refers to the lower end of the garment. At present, however, the term *laylayan* has been appropriated to describe "the people from the margins of the society." In this paper, the author aims to introduce and argue the need for "Laylayan Theology" in the current times.

The COVID-19 pandemic reeled the lives of almost all people in the world. While most of the country continues to get better in combating the infection, the Philippines has been in the bottom of the ranking in the recent Covid resilience ranking (Bloomberg, 2022). Moreover, the World Justice Project (2021) released the WJP Rule of Law Index 2021, which evaluates the rule of law in 139 jurisdictions. The Philippines ranked 102 as the rule of law deteriorated in the archipelago. The continuous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic -- including the social injustices in the country, may have resulted in the national poverty rate increasing from 16.7% in 2018 to an estimated 21% in 2020 (Cordero, 2021). An estimated 56.5 million Filipinos are considered lower and have poor income levels. From this marginalized sector in the Philippine society, intersection forms of marginality

and oppression can still be seen in everyday life of the people. They are in the peripheries, the interstices, in the gutter, and the very end of the garment -- the laylayan of the society.

2. Scripture, Tradition and Context

Challenges in Christian mission and evangelization efforts led many theologians and missiologists to develop contextualization, inculturation, and translation models to better address missionary work in different contexts. In the book *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr asserts that there are other ways whereby culture responds to the gospel (Niebuhr, 1975). Kirsteen Kim (2004) explained that mission studies came into being as an academic discipline in the 19th century. Laurie Green (2009) asserts that all theology has context and includes action. Jose de Mesa's *Mabathalang Pag-aaral* (doing theology with culture in mind) considers the word "inculturation" as the process of "making the gospel meaningful and challenging in a particular cultural context" (De Mesa & Cacho, 2012).

De Mesa and Lode Wostyn (1990) also pointed out that people no longer speak of culture and world events as simply areas to which theology is adapted and applied. Instead, they become the very sources of theology along with scripture and tradition. In *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans (2002) determined that there are ways of understanding the Christian faith using the word of God and looking at cultural aspects of the human experience. The appropriation of the gospel is drawn from the experience and culture of the people. Thus, human experience in the current context and culture and the Christian tradition must dialogue.

The scripture, tradition, and context (present human experience) are valid sources of a theology that is relevant and responsive to the signs of the times (Paul VI, 1965). Stephen Bevans asserts that it is a theological imperative to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context (Bevans, 2002). Stressing the value of context in the theological endeavor, he claimed that, "There is no such thing as 'theology'; there is only *contextual* theology." Bevans explains that "we can only speak about a theology that makes sense at a certain place and in a certain time," and although "we can certainly learn from others, the theology of others can never be our own" (Bevans, 2002).

Moreover, Darrel Whiteman (1997) mentioned that contextualization in mission usher three challenges: the prophetic, hermeneutic, and personal. The prophetic challenge refers to how contextualization can change and transform the context. The hermeneutic challenge refers to how contextualization can expand our understanding of the Gospel. The personal challenge concerns the change in missionaries who have become part of the body of Christ in a context different from their own. Whiteman's (1997) mission conceptualization is "carrying out the Great Commission and living out the Great Commandment in a world of cultural diversity with a Gospel that is both truly Christian in content and culturally significant in form."

In the Gospels, Jesus deeply cared for the poor and the marginalized. The Gospel tells how He loves those in the peripheries of society. When the disciples saw children as a nuisance, Jesus treated them as treasures to be cherished. He heard their longing to be with him and welcomed the young ones saying, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

Jesus also valued women. From the early times, women were regarded differently, and they were seen as having lesser value than men. However, Jesus showed compassion for women when conversing with the Samaritan woman at the well. He appeared to Mary Magdalene first after his resurrection. He listened to the plea of the woman with bleeding illness. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34).

Jesus listened to the sick and the ill. He let the blind see and the lame walk. He healed the lepers who approached him. During his time, being sick was associated with sinfulness. People look down on those who are suffering from illness. However, Jesus looked at them with a gaze of love, and he welcomed and healed them. In the gospel of St. Mark, a leper approached Jesus to ask for healing; he was moved with pity, stretched out His

hand, and touched him. Jesus said, "Be clean, and immediately leprosy left him, and he was made clean" (Mark 1: 42). Lastly, Jesus saved humankind from damnation. He listened to the Father's will and died to uplift man and keep them from sin. He loved the sinners, the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized.

As members of the faith community, we are to be like Jesus, who loves the poor and listens to their voices. Gustavo Guttierrez (2011) reminds us of God's preferential love for the poor. The church has to be on their side everywhere in their struggle. The love for the poor and the marginalized is anchored in our faith in Christ, who listened and cared for the afflicted. Pope Francis reiterated that prioritizing the marginalized is not political but rather a Gospel (Glatz, 2020). Listening to the voices from the margins is key to healing and helping the poor. It is a Christian vocation which the members need to respond to.

In the Philippine context, the people in the margins are those in the "laylayan." They are those who are seldom heard by the people in power, and they are lowly and pushed aside by the tyrants. People in the "laylayan" are the Filipino Christians from the margins who need to be heard, valued, welcomed and healed. Like Jesus, we are called to listen to their voices and begin caring and loving them. In this paper, the context is the Christian beliefs and spiritual experiences of select marginalized Filipino Christians: indigenous youth, church members in the grassroots and women. Although the definition of the term marginalized is "to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group" (Bevans, 2002), this author expands the concept of marginalization to groups of people who are not given much attention or underrepresented in empirical research studies.

3. Laylayan Theology as a Framework

Laylayan theology expresses the identity of a particular believing community—the Filipino Christians from the margins— and hopes to help them deal with social change that comes upon them. Schreiter (1985) pointed that the two principal tasks of theology are to help express the identity of the believing community and to help it deal with the social change that comes upon the community. Laylayan theology privileges the other by intently listening to their voices and proclaiming their missional way of living the gospel. *Laylayan* theology advocates for relegated Christians. It encourages all followers of Jesus Christ to "live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (cf. Phil 1:27) and "to go out and seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, [and] freely share [the good news]."

Laylayan theology is a response to the call for a theology that proceeds from the people and goes back to the people; a theology that contains the people's lives and experiences and struggles. However, this author clarifies that *laylayan theology* is not a "theology of the margins" or liberation theology. The interlocutors in this study locate the margins as liminal space for the flourishing of the Christian faith.

Laylayan theology privileges the personal and communal relationship of the Other with God. It brings to the fore their active participation in the *missio Dei* (Bosch, 2011). Also, it unravels the missional way of life of marginalized followers of Christ and amplifies their prophetic voices. More importantly, *laylayan* theology is an invitation for the church to engage in sincere dialogue with the Other.

Many marginalized Christians have particular notions of faith and distinct religious experiences that can illumine *missio Dei* (mission of God). They can contribute to the current understanding of world Christianity and inform the church to model the inclusivity of Jesus Christ. *Laylayan* theology amplifies the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12) coming from "those who cannot speak, the destitute, the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9). The author hopes that in surfacing the laylayan theology, it can reveal the face of Jesus Christ. It is in the suffering people that we see the face of Christ. God is the God of justice because his teachings speak in the face of the lowly and marginalized (Danenber, 1999).

One of the essential marks of *laylayan* theology is the utilization of empirical data. It also took shape in dialogue with other scientific disciplines such as the psychology of

religion and social phenomenology. As such, it gives "renewed shape to the scientific character of theology [and] speaks from its theological critical consciousness to the universality" (Boeve, 2014).

The present faith understanding and life in the church of select marginalized Filipino Christians go beyond the Anselmian adage, "[Christian] faith seeking understanding." Their knowledge of the Christian faith (*fides quae*) moves them to bring goodness to the poor, reach out to those who have drifted away from the church, and urge them to share the love of Jesus with others. As an act of believing (*fides qua*), the Christian faith strengthens them to face the challenges of daily living. It unites their families, the community, and the church. This information contributes to the informed dialogue between the church and Christians in the contemporary world.

Current studies show that the Christian faith is still abundantly present in Filipino society and culture. Yet, there is little research on the Christian identity construction of marginalized Filipino Christians. To a certain extent, *laylayan* theology is a response to this lacuna (Boeve, 2014). *Laylayan* theology investigates the cultural, religious context, analyzes the Christian beliefs and praxis of the people from the margins, and considers other factors (e.g., traditions, religions, philosophies) that shape the Christian identity. This work strives to be a credible and relevant account of the marginalized Christians faith. "Because only those religions and philosophies which can understand themselves and their truth claims as particular and in relation to others, can contribute to a multicultural society, where difference matters and plurality does not lead to relativism" (Boeve, 2014).

4. Listening to the Voices from the Margins

As a religious educator and researcher, the author have had the privilege of engaging in dialogue with the select Christians from the margins. Many of my interlocutors perceive the margins as liminal spaces for the flourishing of the Christian faith. In response to the call of James to "listen quick but to speak slowly" (Jas 1:19) and in acknowledgment of marginalized peoples constituting the collective voice of the Body of Christ, the authors have attempted to report and critically reflect on the contemporary faith and praxis of indigenous Christian youths, members of BEC, and *bai* (women). Using empirical phenomenology to achieve this goal, the author interviewed select Christians belonging to the sectors mentioned and documented their first-order constructs on Christian faith and praxis. Then, proceed to the development of specific themes to capture the patterns of the first-order constructs. Next, the second-order constructs were critically examined in light of Christian tradition. Lastly, the invaluable contributions of the select indigenous Christian youths, select members of the basic ecclesial communities, and *bai* (women) to the Christian faith and mission were described. These are just few of the many vulnerable sectors in the society which we need to listen to.

Select Voices from the Laylayan

Indigenous Christians Youth: Their Perspectives and Practices

Christians profess that "humankind is created in the image of God" (Gen 1:27) and that we are all "children of God" (Psalm 82:6). Nevertheless, in a predominantly Christian country, such as the Philippines, "tensions and misunderstandings exist between indigenous peoples and people outside the region" (Peterson, 2010, 250).

The Cordillera Mountain range in the Philippines is home to many indigenous peoples who identify as Cordillerans. Ibaloy, Kankana-ey, Ifugao, Kalinga, Apayao/Isneg, Bontoc, and some other smaller tribes reside in this region. Many Cordilleran people are exoticized and viewed as less civilized (Peterson 2010). Many Cordilleran peoples participate in autochthonous rituals and Christian practices simultaneously. Most Cordilleran peoples living in the uplands identify with Protestant Christianity, while many who take up residence in the Hispanicized lowlands adhere to Roman Catholicism (Howell, 2009).

The Cordilleran Christian youth represents the intersectionality of Christian youth in the modern era. Globalization poses a threat to their culture (Anacin 2015, 44), but modernity provides more excellent opportunities for self-actualization (Adonis & Couch, 2017). They are encouraged to practice their Christian faith in an increasingly secular environment. Furthermore, they are challenged to find value and meaning in the Christian faith while navigating life's challenges. More importantly, all Christians are called to spread the Good News.

In 2021, the author conducted a study with Cordilleran youths, asking them, "Who is your God?" and "What traditional religious practices do you participate in?" The study involved 106 Cordilleran youths (74 males and 32 females). A convenience sample was employed in the study. The respondents were aged 14 to 34. The mean age of the respondents is 19.74 years. The informants were equally distributed between rural (upland) and urban (lowland) areas. All respondents are Christians. More than half of the informants belong to the Kankana-ey tribe. Others are Ibaloi, Ifugao, Balangao, Bontoc, Kalinga, and Isneg.

The study revealed that many Cordilleran Christian youths conceptualize God as *Kabunyan*, the supreme deity. *Kabunyan*, a powerful divine being, is a father to humankind, guiding, empowering, and helping them. All that exists, and anything that sustains the universe is attributed to *Kabunyan*. For them, God is worthy of all the glory and praise because He lifts humankind in times of pain and suffering.

A small number of informants mentioned that they did not participate in Cordilleran religious rituals. Many Cordilleran Christian youths practice "*begnas*" (giving thanks to the supreme deity for a good harvest) or "*mangmang*" (pleading with the supreme deity for the preservation of rice terraces). There are a few who utter "*kayo kayo*" to show respect to the guardians of nature and who also engage in "*kopokop*" as well as "*atang*" (offering food to the spirits of dead relatives). Some claim to practice "*bagwa*" (washing the dead's bones) and *tengaw* (days of rest). The cordilleran Christian youths appreciate the traditional rituals because their families have been practicing them for generations. "*Nakasanayan na!*" ("They got used to it!") as one respondent puts it. Furthermore, autochthonous rituals are essential to the community as they unite its people. Several traditional rituals demonstrate Cordilleran's appreciation of *Kabunyan's* blessings.

Most Cordilleran Christian youths considered participating in Christian worship, Catholic sacraments, and other popular religiosity to be "traditional" religious practices. According to a Cordilleran Christian youth, *abang*, *sumang*, *sida*, and *daw-es* are cultural practices that are not offensive to other religions. As a result, tensions between Christianity and autochthonous religion are eased.

Basic Ecclesial Communities: Grassroots of the Church

The Basic Ecclesial Communities or BEC in the Philippines refer to Christian families who gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist. Although they are united to their pastors, lay leaders minister to them regularly. As one of the main characteristics of BEC, members know each other by name and hold a strong sense of belonging and responsibility for one another (Picardal, 2011). The BEC embodies a participatory Church and a Church of the poor (Diocese of Novaliches, nd.). The Church of the Poor is the primary goal of the PCP-II vision for the Church in the Philippines (Bacani, 2005). According to the 2019 Nationwide Survey on BEC (Baring et al. 2019), their objectives are to 1) understand Jesus Christ and the Bible, 2) pray together as a community, 3) work towards spiritual and material salvation and 4) change oppressive structures in society.

The study on "BEC: Church of the Poor and Community of Disciples-A Qualitative Profile Report" (Baring et al., 2021) said that the recruitment of new members of the BEC is crucial. Additionally, the BEC families participate in community activities to change oppressive social structures. According to the report, the [BEC] cells recruit within their neighborhood. Once the cell membership reaches a specific size, it might be time for the cell to be split into two. Gabriel (2021) mentioned that the term recruit should be clarified

since every baptized Christian is already a member of the BEC. Both statements are correct, but the former comes from praxis, and the latter is theological. The incident highlights the importance of context and prophetic dialogue between grassroots Filipino Christians and the institutional church as they strive to fulfill the Christian mission.

In 2019, the author asked around 600 BEC members in the country for their responses to two questions, namely "What is the response of the Church to social issues?" and "What can the Church do to fulfill its mission in these modern times?"

According to the study, the select members of BEC were able to articulate some salient characteristics of being a church -- universal in mission yet aware of their community purpose. Although they are rooted in the Christian tradition, they are contemporary-sensitive in praxis. BEC members believe that they share God's plan to save the world. This belief is usually referred to with the Latin expression mission Dei or the mission of God (World Council of Church, 2013). They are aware of socio-political issues beyond their faith communities, such as extrajudicial killings, threats to human reproduction, the sanctity of marriage, and discrimination of people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions. Their faith motivates them to act for social justice and transformation. Despite the importance of rituals and sacraments in faith, BEC recognizes the social implications of faith on Christian mission and daily life. BEC also acknowledges that they have fundamental relationships with their neighbors. The laypeople make the church contemporary-sensitive by drawing from their lived faith experience and striving to fulfill the love commandments of Jesus within the family, the community, and society.

Bai: Women Serving and Leading the Church

Some scholars claim that many women in the church are in a disadvantaged position. Although women serve in the church, they are not given equal rights in decision-making (Narciso-Apuan, 2021). This repressive social practice hinders female mutuality and contradicts the church's egalitarian spirit. Rebecca S. Chopp (1995) mentions that "despite theories which talk about equality and justice, for instance, feminists become quite aware that what is really repressive or the hundreds of daily practices such as linguistic etiquette which encourages men to speak the most, major references to women as soft and round, familial relations which now expect women to manage jobs both at home and office." Hence, the author investigated the truthfulness of the claim above by interviewing women leaders of BEC in Mindanao. The notions on faith and lived religious experiences of the *bai* (Brazal, 2019) can help understand the grassroots' contemporary Christian faith, their active participation in Christian mission, and the essential qualities of the "church of the poor."

The island of Mindanao is the second largest in the Philippines. The Indigenous Peoples (IP) Ata, Bagobo, Bla-an, Bukidnon, Dibabawon, and other groups were the first to populate precolonial Mindanao. During the 13th century, Indonesian traders and Arab proselytizers converted many IP to Islam. Muslims in Mindanao who belong to certain ethnolinguistic groups identify themselves as Bangsamoro people. These are the *Iranun*, *Jama Mapun*, *Kalagan*, *Kalibugan*, *Magindanao*, *Maranao*, *Sama*, *Sangil*, *Tausug* and *Yakan*. However, Christian settlers from Luzon and Visayas settled in Mindanao and dramatically altered the socio-religious landscape. A recent census revealed that more than half of the 24 million people in Mindanao are Christians.

In this paper, the author shall refer to women leaders of BEC as *bai*. *Bai* is an honorific title used among indigenous Filipino communities, and it relates to a woman who can hold leadership positions in her community (Brazal, 2019). By bringing to the fore the *bai*'s perspectives on the "new way of being church" and making their ideas on the Christian faith and the church's mission heard, the author hope to uncover the significant contributions of poor women to the church and Christian mission.

During the year 2019, the author surveyed 60 *bai* from Mindanao. These questions were asked: "What is the significance of your Christian faith?" and "What is the church's mission?"

Among the *bai*, faith is both an act of believing (*fides qua*) and a way of life that enables them to face the challenges of everyday life. Their Christian faith binds families, communities, and the church together. They use their understanding of the Christian faith (*fides quae*) to bring goodness to the poor, reach out to those who have drifted away from the church, and encourage them to share the love of Jesus with others.

The *bai* have articulated that their faith is personal yet ecclesial. They have essential relationships with others and understand that they are active evangelizers to the "unchurched." The term "unchurched" is used by the respondent to refer to those who have drifted away from the church, those whose faith has faded, or those who do not belong to the church.

They strive to share the gospel with the whole world. They facilitate one of the most urgent tasks of evangelization, which is to restore in Christians a sense of ecclesial identity that mediates God's revelation and makes it possible for people to respond personally to Jesus Christ through faith (Fisichella, 2014).

Evangelization begins with the credibility of our lives as believers. The basis for this belief is our conviction that grace acts and transforms to the point of converting the heart (Fisichella, 2014). Christian credibility is evident among the *bai*. Their role is to serve as the link between their *barangay* (the smallest political unit in the Philippines) and their church (as an institution) to facilitate the integral development of individuals and society. Mindanao's most pressing social issues are abortion, illegal drugs, crime, and insurgency. It is expected that the church will be more vocal and fulfill its prophetic role. Yet, the *bai* are aware of the importance of non-violent action and instead focus on charitable acts - first towards their family, then towards the BEC. Furthermore, the *bai* have indicated that lay empowerment occurs in BEC, and such agency is critical in evangelical ministry and peace promotion.

5. Conclusion: Towards Prophetic Dialogue

The voices from the margins can contribute to our contemporary understanding of God's mission of reconciliation and our participation in the *missio Dei*. However, personal experiences alone are not sufficient in our God-talk, and our faith tradition should also be considered (De Mesa and Cacho 2011).

In unraveling *laylayan* theology, the author hopes this theologizing will further promote reflections and discourse towards prophetic dialogue between Christians from the margins and the universal church. A dialogue wherein the members of the Body of Christ "respectfully listen, sincerely open their mind and heart, and willingly learn from the Other" (Phan, 2018). A church that musters the "courage to speak truth to power to restore justice, to build up peace, and to maintain the integrity of creation" (Phan, 2018).

Laylayan theology hopes to be one of the many prophetic voices in the church today. Privileging and listening to the voices of marginalized Christians leads to polyvocality in the church. This is critical since world Christianity is now likened to "rhizomes [i.e., growing below and above ground and moving crablike in all directions] instead of a single, many-branched vertical tree (Phan, 2018)." Considering the unique context of others and discovering their Christian way of life can contribute to a better understanding of how the seeds of the Word can be planted in a particular soil, nourished, and ultimately flourish. Also, valuing the voices of other Christians shows our appreciation for the multifarious ways by which the Christian faith is articulated and practiced. In lending our ears to the voices of the marginalized, we also demonstrate our solidarity with our neighbors and struggle with them against "knotted systems" (Scapp, 2020).

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:15-17). More than two centuries later, Christians face the same question. The notions of faith and praxis of select marginalized Christians revealed that they too proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. As such, there is a need to go to the peripheries and theologize from the trenches. Interpreting the actual

Christian experience of marginalized peoples provides an ear to the ground knowledge on contemporary Christian faith and the church.

This original work is part of a comprehensive collection of unpublished theological study on the different sectors of the margins. Further studies can be done to offer a *laylayan* theology that will examine the human experience of the marginalized people with the transcendent Other that leads to faith.

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