

## Article

# 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 that privileges and brings to the fore the voices of the people from the margins. In this study, the invaluable contributions of indigenous Christian youths, the basic ecclesial communities, and *bai* (Filipina Christian leaders) to the Christian faith and mission are articulated. *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

## 1. Introduction

Jesus Christ, in the Parable of the Sower, taught that the Word of God is like seeds that are sown and settled in different types of soil (New American Bible 2002, cf. Matthew 13: 1–23). 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” (New American Bible 2002, 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 became embedded in Philippine society and culture (Del Castillo 2021).

The quincentenary of Christianity in the Philippines is a milestone for the Church. Moreover, it is an opportune moment to re-discover and critically reflect on religious notions and intently listen to the voices of those who are unheard of or underrepresented in society. For Christians in the modern world, their vocation is to amplify the voices of the people from the margins of society. Edward Casey (2020) asked a philosophical question, “What does it mean to have a voice?” He emphasized that, at the very least, it implies being heard by others and acting to make a difference in society’s way of thinking and acting. Having no voice is equivalent to being disempowered, marginalized, and oppressed.

On 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 societal issues affect all people, especially the disempowered, the poor, the vulnerable, and those in the “*laylayan*” whose voices are often unheard or given little attention. In the Philippines, *laylayan* is a Filipino term that refers to the lower end of the garment. At present, however, the word *laylayan* has been appropriated to describe “the people from the margins of the society”. They are those who have a small or no voice at all in the communities. In this paper, the author aims to introduce and argue the need for “*Laylayan* Theology” and bring to the fore the voices



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from the margins as they reveal “God’s benevolent love” in the modern world (Cacho and Castillo 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of people worldwide, particularly the poor. While many countries have demonstrated the ability to cope with the virulent disease, the Philippines was ranked at the bottom of the recent COVID-19 resilience ranking (Bloomberg 2021). 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). Numerous Filipinos are struggling with poverty. From this sector in the Philippine society, intersecting forms of marginality and oppression can be seen in everyday life of the people. As such, they are in the peripheries, the interstices, at the very end of the social fabric—the *laylayan* of the society.

## 2. Theology from the Laylayan

### 2.1. The Margins according to Scriptures and Tradition

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis (2013) exhorts Christians to go beyond their comfort zone and go to the “peripheries” in need of the light of the gospel. The peripheries refer to the edge or outside a boundary. It is often an empty and nonproductive area that is neglected or abandoned (Pilario 2005). People in the peripheries are often marginalized, sidelined, ignored, or given little attention. A person living on the margins is an outsider (Rettig 2017). However, it is in the peripheries that the poor and marginalized dwell. Since Jesus is the poorest of the poor, he is the first of the poor (Vatican News 2021). Thus, wherever the poor are, God is present.

The gospels proclaim that Jesus deeply cared for people regardless of their social status. Jesus showed loving compassion for the poor and marginalized and reached out to those in the peripheries of society. When some of the disciples saw children as a nuisance, Jesus treated the young as important members of society. He said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (New American Bible 2002, Matthew 19: 14).

Jesus showed high regard for women. He conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. He healed the woman who was suffering from hemorrhages. Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (New American Bible 2002, Mark 5: 34).

Jesus also listened to the plea of the sick and healed them. He cured the blind and the lame. Jesus healed those suffering from leprosy— a disease associated with sinfulness. He told the leper, “Be clean, and immediately leprosy left him, and he was made clean” (New American Bible 2002, Mark 1: 42). More importantly, Jesus saved humankind from damnation. He listened to the Father’s will and sacrificed himself to uplift man and keep them from sin. Jesus loved the sinners, the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized. As such, the preferential option for the poor is at the center of the gospel and the center of Jesus’ proclamation (Francis 2020). Therefore, it is a Christian imperative to love the poor and intently listen to their voices.

The term preferential option for the poor originated from the Latin American Bishops’ Conferences in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. The Medellin Conference invited the members of the church to become a church for the poor (Latin American Bishops 1968). The Puebla Conference affirms that the preferential option for the poor is not meant to exclude anyone but instead a preference that will draw the poor nearer to us (Volkomenner 1979). The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind, and his active love for them is the condition for entering his kingdom (Catholic Church 1992). Ratzinger (1997) emphasized that such passage in the catechism is the very source of what the church refers to as the preferential option for the poor. Jezreel (1997) states that there are six things that people can do to

practice preferential option for the poor: connect with the poor, ask questions, seek answers, start advocating, work with the poor, watch your money, and give money. However, this author asserts that one way for Christians to show their preference for the poor is by listening to the voices of the marginalized. The love for the poor and the marginalized is anchored in our faith in Christ, who listened and cared for those in the peripheries. Pope Francis stresses that prioritizing the marginalized is not a political or ideological choice but the heart of the Gospel (Glatz 2020).

Scapp (2020) noted that many voices in our society are struggling to be heard. Some of these voices are suppressed voices where the “voice of an individual or community is often denied the freedom to find, develop, and use its voice or to find and gain an audience” (p. 158). Moreover, there are voices that are silenced by existing structures and privileged communities. Usually, these voices come from people from the margins of society. However, such muted voices can help better understand Christianity in contemporary times. The experiences and insights of those in the margins reveal the face of God in their particular contexts. As a result, coming to voice is a courageous act (hooks 1989). Privileging the voices of the marginalized fosters a “dynamic and creative space which lies beyond what those at the center can imagine” (Pilario 2005, p. 5). Hence, listening to the voices from the margins is key to understanding the Kingdom of God and caring for the forgotten parts of the body of Christ.

## 2.2. Experience Seeking Faith

Faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) is St. Anselms’ celebrated definition of theology (Phan 2018b). Many theologians have developed this description over the centuries. Recently, new paths for theologizing have been established to provide a deeper understanding of the faith. For example, in the United States, Black theology describes liberation as the center of the Christian gospel and blackness as God’s primary presence (Cone 1997). In Korea, Minjung theology describes the struggles of the Korean Christian and embraces their history and the message of the gospels (An 2019). Meanwhile, in India, Dalit theology questioned the conversion of the upper caste and the struggle of the Dalits (Nirmal 1990). Several other theologies incorporate aspects of their context and experience into how they view God.

Bevans (2015) argues that good theologizing is a reflection on faith that learns from experience, that illuminates it, and sometimes challenges it. He also asserts that it is a theological imperative to understand the Christian faith in terms of a particular context (Bevans 2002). Stressing the value of context in the theological endeavor, he claimed, “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, pp. 15–16); since Christianity is polycentric in nature, it can be expanded and adapted to each locality and context (Kim and Kim 2013).

Moreover, Darrel Whiteman (1997) mentioned that contextualization in mission ushers 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” (p. 6).

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 Filipinos from the margins who need to be heard, valued, welcomed and healed. Recent data show that about 17.6 million Filipinos live below the poverty line. Sixty-four percent of Filipino households struggle with food insecurity, in

which children are the most vulnerable (Lenahan 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, children, especially those who are disabled and have special needs, are most likely to be forgotten (Del Castillo 2022). Moreover, the lack of support for indigenous peoples has aggravated the conditions of rural indigenous communities (Tadem 2021). There has been violence against women, gender inequality, stereotyping, and discouragement of women leaders in the Philippines. Women who work at the center of global shifts of production at cheap labor sites suffer the most (McCulloch and Stancich 1998). These are just a few examples of the people marginalized in the “*laylayan*” of Philippine society. There are still other individuals who have been forgotten and neglected and whose voices need to be heard. During a time in history when humanity is seeking God’s face more than ever, their perspectives and experiences can serve as a valuable source of new knowledge.

Anh Phan (2018a) argues that “theology today may not begin from a dogmatic standpoint but from the human experience of the transcendent Other can be conceptualized.” As such, theology can be conceptualized as “experience seeking understanding that leads to faith” (p. 210). Thus, Christians professing faith in their particular contexts can contribute to our understanding of God.

Like Jesus, we are called to listen to the voices from the margins. As such, this paper foregrounds the religious notions and beliefs of select marginalized Filipino Christians: indigenous youth, church members at 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” (Merriam-Webster n.d.), this author expands the concept of marginalization to groups of people who are not given much attention or underrepresented in empirical research studies. The author selected the aforementioned groups based on the existing empirical data collected in the past three years. However, it is important to note that the marginalized groups in this study are limited and can still be explored in future research and theological reflections.

### 3. Laylayan Theology: Pathway towards Polyvocality in the Church

*Laylayan* theology expresses the identity of a particular believing community—the Filipino Christians from the margins—and hopes to help them deal with the social change that comes upon them. Schreiter (1985) pointed out 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” (New American Bible 2002, Philippians 1: 27) and “to go out and seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, [and] freely share [the good news]” (Francis 2015, p. 1).

*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. It privileges the personal and communal relationship of the marginalized 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 entire church.

Many marginalized Christians have particular notions of faith and distinct religious experiences that can illumine the *missio Dei* (mission of God). They can contribute to the current understanding of world Christianity and inform the church in modeling the inclusivity of Jesus Christ. *Laylayan* theology amplifies the “sound of sheer silence” (New American Bible 2002, 1 Kings 19: 12) coming from “those who cannot speak, the destitute, the poor and needy” (New American Bible 2002, Proverbs 31: 8–9). The author hopes that surfacing *laylayan* theology can reveal the face of Jesus Christ for 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 (Danenberg 1999).

One of the essential marks of *laylayan* theology is the utilization of empirical data as an approach to bringing out the perspectives and voices of the people from the margins. 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 university” (Boeve 2014, p. 375). The human experiences from the *laylayan* bring a fresh understanding of the gospel as re-appropriated in a particular unique context and culture.

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 and reach out to those who have drifted away from the church, and urges them to share the love of Jesus with others. As an act of believing (*fides qua*), the Christian faith gives them strength 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. *Laylayan* theology investigates the cultural and 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, p. 376).

#### 4. Listening to the Voices from the Margins

As a religious educator and researcher, the author has had the privilege of engaging in dialogue with select Christians from the margins. Many of the author’s 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” (New American Bible 2002, James 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 the basic ecclesial communities, and *bai*. 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 proceeded 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* to the Christian faith and mission were described. These are some of the voices from the *laylayan*, which represent some of the many vulnerable sectors within our society. The complete data on each sector will be published in the near future. This study covered only a limited number of sectors, and future research is encouraged.

##### 4.1. Indigenous Christians Youth: Their Perspectives and Practices

Christians profess that “humankind is created in the image of God” (New American Bible 2002, Gen 1: 27) and that we are all “children of God” (New American Bible 2002, Psalm 82: 6). In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian country, “tensions and misunderstandings exist between indigenous peoples and people outside the region” (Peterson 2010, p. 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. Although, globalization poses a threat to their culture (Anacin 2015, p. 44), modernity provides more excellent opportunities for self-actualization (Adonis and Couch 2017). They are encouraged to practice their Christian faith in an increasingly secular environment. Also, 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 from 14 to 34. The mean age of the respondents was 19.74 years. The informants were equally distributed between rural (upland) and urban (lowland) areas. All respondents were Christians. More than half of the informants belonged to the *Kankana-ey* tribe. Others were *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 the autochthonous religion are eased.

#### 4.2. Basic Ecclesial Communities: Grassroots of the Church

The Basic Ecclesial Communities, or BECs, in the Philippines refer to Christian families who gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist. Although they are united with their pastors and parish priests, lay leaders minister to them regularly. As one of the main characteristics of BECs, members know each other by name and hold a strong sense of belonging and responsibility for one another (Picardal 2011). Many of them experience challenges and struggles within their family, community, and churches.

The BECs embody a participatory Church and a Church of the poor (Diocese of Novaliches n.d.). 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 BECs (Baring et al. 2021), 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 to the BECs is crucial. Additionally, the BEC families participate in community activities to change oppressive social structures. Some members participate in advocacy programs against various issues, such as human rights violations, land reforms, military abuse, corruption, environmental degradation, and other injustices (Picardal 2011; Baring et al. 2021). According to the report, the (BECs) 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 Churches 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. As such, BECs recognize the social implications of faith on Christian mission and daily life. BEC also acknowledge 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.

#### 4.3. *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 (2019, p. 306) 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 BECs 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 (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017).

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 about the Christian faith and the church's mission heard, the author hopes to uncover the significant contributions of poor women to the church and Christian mission.

During the year 2019, the author surveyed 60 Christian *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 respondents 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.

The *bai* strive to share the gospel with their households and communities. 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 2015).

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 2015). 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. The *bai* perceive that Mindanao's most pressing social issues are abortion, illegal drugs, crime, and insurgency. The Filipina Christian leaders expect the church will be more vocal and fulfill its prophetic role. It must be stressed that 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 the BEC, and such agency is critical in evangelical ministry and peace promotion.

## 5. Conclusions: 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 2012).

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 2018a, p. 12). 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 2018a, p. 1).

*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 study revealed that the indigenous Christian youth are reconceiving the face of the Christian God in light of their particular cultural background. Instead of making them less Christian, it leads them to a more flourishing faith. Also, members of the basic ecclesial communities believe they are part of God's saving plan despite their struggles and



challenges. In addition, the Christian bai serves as the link between the family, community, and church. They play an important role in evangelical ministry and peace promotion.

This polyvocality in the church 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 2008, p. 194)”. 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?” and Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (New American Bible 2002, Matthew 16: 15–17). More than two centuries later, Christians face the same question. The notions of faith and praxis of select marginalized Christians reveal that they too proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. 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 of contemporary Christian faith and the church.

This original work is part of a comprehensive collection of unpublished theological studies on the different sectors of the margins. Further studies can be carried out 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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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted per the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Data were collected within an accepted educational setting. More importantly, the information obtained is encoded in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

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