

MINDANAO-SULU PASTORAL CONFERENCE: AN ON-GOING STRUGGLE IN BECOMING A SYNODAL CHURCH

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Embracing the watershed reflections on the local church in Lumen Gentium, the Mindanao Church gave birth to a pan-diocesan pastoral conference that sought to embody the architectonic themes of a synodal church namely, communion, participation, and co-responsibility. This paper aims to contribute to the synodal conversation by reflecting upon some key areas of the Mindanao ecclesial experience.

The first part reflects upon the inchoate attempts at re-appropriating Vatican II including the ecclesiology of the pastoral conference with the attendant issues that precipitated the Dissociation of the bishops from the Secretariat. The second portion is a critical consideration of the ecclesiological dynamics and interdisciplinary mediations as they influenced the direction that the conference took. The third part is an exploration of a proposal of a broad theoretical and paraxial framework for a Mindanaoan synodal church taking into account the experiences, the fissures, and the paradoxes of Mindanao. This contribution will close with a plea for a spirituality that may be relevant to a church in via – a church on a synodal way.

Keywords: Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference, the ecclesiology of communion, faith, and politics, re-contextualization, the normativity of the future.

INTRODUCTION

Mindanao can be described in paradoxes. It is characterized as a “land of promise” but also regarded as a space of constant contestation; abundant in natural resources but has remained in the

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economic periphery;¹ culturally rich but often regarded from the monolithic lens of conflict and underdevelopment.² Whether the situation in the late 1960's and early 70's is deemed much worse than today may be subject to a historian's judgment but one can say that the core issues now seem to find very strong echoes from the issues then. The aforementioned situation was the context that confronted the Mindanao Church not long after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The theology of the local church in *Lumen Gentium* and the social orientation heralded in the Malines document (that was to become *Gaudium et Spes*) found a fertile ground in the paradoxes of Mindanao.

Even before the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, there was already mounting violence against the poor and the indigenous peoples in Mindanao. With the alarming numbers of families displaced from their homes because of militarization, any discerning person from Mindanao could have felt the need for concrete action for justice and peace if not in the name of the Gospel, in the name of humanity. The initial hesitancy of the Philippine bishops to forge a unified stance against violence, oppression, and poverty in the country was well documented. However, the Mindanao bishops appeared to be more socially concerned than their counterparts in the Visayas (Central Philippines) and Luzon (Northern Philippines) islands.³

PART ONE: INCHOATE STEPS OF EARLY ADAPTERS

The beginnings of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) was conceived in a pastoral meeting of the Mindanao Bishops in April 1970. The idea came from Archbishop Gonzaga of Zamboanga who was impressed by the all-Indian Conference that sought to render the orientation of Vatican II into the reality of the

¹ Its mineral deposits are valued at \$312 billion or about 40 percent of the country's total mineral reserves of \$840 billion, DENR-MGB, 2008.

² Human Development Index (HDI) reports consistently show that majority of the lowest-ranked provinces are from Mindanao.

³ A separate study on the pastoral letters issued by individual bishops during the Martial Law era shows that out of some eighty-six letters, sixty of them were written by eight bishops of Mindanao. See, Felix Casalmo, *Vision of a New Society* (Manila: 1980), 163.

Church of India. Archbishop Gonzaga's enthusiasm was passed on to fellow bishops of Mindanao and they decided to organize a gathering of representatives from all the dioceses of Mindanao and Sulu to work out the implications of Vatican II in the Church of Mindanao. The first MSPC was not to have the grander vision proffered by the fashionable array of ideologies at that time. Its aim was more modest and thus less pretentious.

The first MSPC was held in Davao City in November 1971. It was attended by 198 delegates, 74 of whom were laypeople. The first MSPC executive secretary Fr. Sim Sunpayco, SJ commented that it was a Pentecostal event where lay people were encouraged to voice out their ideas and opinions.⁴ The significance of this, according to Karl Gaspar, was that for the first time, the bishops listened to the discussions of the conference without them having to pontificate about the proceedings or ideas during the conference. The move was a thoroughgoing empowerment of lay persons to collectively discern and respond to the situation that the church was in.

According to Bishop Francisco Claver, who was one of the convenors, MSPC was propelled by the Vatican II ideas of dialogue, participation, and co-responsibility.⁵ These ideas were to become the architectonic themes for MSPC I.⁶ Architectonics relate not only to structures and classifications but also to interrelations. In Claver's mind dialogue, participation and co-responsibility are the structure; the matter, and the interrelations of the MS Church. Even at this initial stage, it seemed that the current Synod on Synodality's insistence on communion, participation, and mission had already been on the theo-pastoral horizon of the first organizers of the pastoral conference.

The prevailing "synodal" sentiment of the first conference

⁴ Simplicio Sunpayco, "Review of the MSPC: From MSPC I to III," in *MSPC IV Proceedings* (8-12 April 1980), 8.

⁵ See, *Lumen Gentium* nos. 9ff; 40; *Gaudium et Spes* nos. 2, 3, 4, 10, 23, 25, 54, 55. Beyond Vatican II, see for example, Benedict XVI, "Message on the Occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action" (10 August 2012).

⁶ Francisco Claver, "The History of BCCs: Philippines," in *Church of the People: Basic Christian Communities, Bishops'-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development* (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 18-27, 20.

was stated in the joint pastoral letter of Mindanao-Sulu bishops: “During those 4 days of prayer and dialogue, we trust we will be able, in the free interchange of ideas and experiences, to come up with some guidelines – or at least beginnings of guidelines – for the building up of the Christian community in these southernmost islands of the Philippines.”⁷ In short, it was looking for a way to be the church that is responsive to the concrete situation of Mindanao. From the discussions, it became clear that the laity played an essential role in the fulfillment of such a vision.⁸ The initial success of MSPC inspired the bishops to create a board to oversee the task of communication and facilitation.

Turn to the People Ecclesiology, Red Scare, and Fissures

Three years later, the MSPC II was convened in Cagayan de Oro in March-April 1974. Half of the 254 delegates were lay people. It was regarded as a glorious event among the lay participants and the church as expressed in the life and dynamics of MSPC were “best understood not as an institutional reality, but rather as a living experience of a people, the people of God in Mindanao-Sulu.”⁹ While MSPC I focused on pastoral renewal and the involvement of the laity, MSPC II’s workshop reflections were invariably focused on the stories about the socio-economic situation of the people. One can discern a “turn to the people” and a “turn to the poor” ecclesiologies as the new imaginary for the Mindanao church. This “from below” way of being church provides a privileged matrix for the embodiment of the concrete meaning of baptismal priesthood, lay ministry, catechesis, and situated theological reflection, of inculturation, spirituality, and most

⁷ *Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference*, 17-20 November 1971, Conference Workshop, (Davao City: Mindanao Development Center, 1971), 2.

⁸ One important recommendation of the conference was that “the Church give adequate support to the development of programs for training lay leaders for a more effective and fuller cooperation of the laity in the service and in the building up of the Christian community.” *MSPC I Recommendations*, 1.

⁹ These words were from the Executive Secretary of MSPC II Rogelio Antalan, “Christian Community Building in the 70’s,” in *Communications* 23 (April 1977): 2.

importantly orthopraxis. The pastoral thrust that emerged out of this was education for justice.¹⁰

However, with the massive conscientization of the peasant-parishioners, (encouraged and supported by the MSPC Board and Secretariat) some Mindanao Bishops were already apprehensive of the ‘turn’ that the pastoral conference was taking. The first recorded disquiet was the question of the juridical status of the MSPC Board vis-à-vis the Bishops and the conference.¹¹ But the fissure in the relationship of the main protagonists of MSPC became manifest in 1976 when five bishops wrote a letter to the Board claiming that the MSPC had become something other than what it was originally envisioned to be.¹² In response to that letter, Bishop Francisco Claver who at that time was MSPC Board co-chairman wrote that the conference is trying whether consciously or not to formulate a new ecclesiology – not so much in terms of articulating a theology but of *doing* theology where it matters – with the peasants and the grassroots.¹³ Anticipating the juridical and ecclesiological question as to the nature of the conference, Claver writes: “The MSPC was conceived as a forum of ideas: the delegates from the various Churches of Mindanao-Sulu were to meet, share experiences, test the ideas behind the experiences, discuss common problems, seek common solutions, and if necessary, set up new structures to meet common needs...The ideas were pastoral ideas leading to action, to the enhancement of Church life, to the building up of people into genuine Christian Communities.”¹⁴ Anticipating the canonical-juridical questions, Claver stresses that the conference is pastorally oriented. This thrust is complemented by a theological orientation that regards the conference as a “communion of churches, meeting in charity and out of charity, for greater effectivity in its one dominant aim of building up truly Christian communities.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Karl Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 18-19.

¹¹ *Minutes of MSPC Board Meeting*, 14 June 1975, Cagayan de Oro City, 1.

¹² Karl Gaspar names these bishops as: Bishops Antonio Mabutas, Francisco Cruces, Gerard Mongeau, Joseph Regan, Reginald Arliss. See Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 45.

¹³ See, Bishop Francisco Claver, “The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference: The Pains of Growth,” in *MSPC Communications* 19 (March 1976): 2-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

Use of Structural Analysis and Red Tagging

This provided a respite from the controversy and despite the disquiet among some, the majority of the bishops stood behind MSPC and supported the call of the board to convene MSPC III.¹⁶ At the opening mass of the third MSPC, the Board Chairman Bishop Carmelo Morelos then bishop of Butuan said in his homily: “Vatican II opened new vistas for the Church. It offered the fresh wines of participative leadership and co-responsibility in the Church. The MS Church savored this fresh wine, tentatively perhaps at first. But she decided that if allowed to age and mature in new wineskins it could become vintage wine. So she set out to fashion the new wineskins: cooperation and coordination, mutual assistance and sharing of resources, the sharing of experiences and testing the ideas behind the experiences, the constant intercommunication and support of one another, and more importantly, the openness to one another and the Spirit in the context of loyalty and union with Peter...Slowly but surely, participation and co-responsibility began to happen. Both, at the same, are burden and challenge.”¹⁷

MSPC III which was convened in April 1977¹⁸ intensified the commitment to justice and peace that began in MSPC II. “Education to justice progressed towards the organization of the marginalized sectors. Conscientization began to involve tools of social analysis.”¹⁹ This commitment to the poor was coupled with a commitment to better Muslim-Christian relations.²⁰ It was during these times when Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) were given concrete existence although arguably they were present in Mindanao in different forms in the late sixties.²¹ Through the BCC’s the

¹⁶ See Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 19

¹⁷ Bishop Carmelo D.F. Morelos, Homily at Opening Liturgy MSPC III Proceedings, 2.

¹⁸ One significant feature of this conference is that the delegates elected Karl Gaspar a lay person as Executive Secretary previously held by two priests.

¹⁹ Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 20.

²⁰ Louis Hechanova, “Towards a People’s Church in Mindanao - Impression on MSPC III,” in *NASSA News* 9 no. 3 (March-April 1977): 2.

²¹ Francisco Claver, “The History of BCCs: Philippines,” in *Church of the People: Basic Christian Communities, Bishops’-Businessmen’s Conference for Human Development* (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 18-27, 19.

peasant church members collectively analyzed their situation using tools of structural analysis they learned after it was popularized and spread among the Church sector by Francois Houtart.²² Social-structural analysis was immediately re-appropriated by the BCCs in Mindanao. The structural analysis developed from the Marxist method of Houtart became a common exercise in BCC²³ that the military would later label BCCs as Marxist revolutionary cells. It was in such a climate that some Bishops appeared to capitulate to what was then called the “red scare.” There were charges of communist infiltration in the Church and some feared that the Board had become an instrument of the Communist Party. The lay leadership was accused of being Marxists and accountabilities were put into question.²⁴ The net effect was “the closing of the doors which used to welcome the MSPC thrust and retreat to the safety of what is orthodox. The first victims of this enclosure were the MSPCs staff, who were viewed as leftist infiltrators and were therefore barred from entering some dioceses. The enclosure scheme was followed by a suggestion that the MSPCs be closed.”²⁵

Disengagement and Dissolution

Nevertheless, MSPC IV was convened in 1980 in Pagadian City with a focus on Jesus Christ as the one who liberates, inspires, and gives his Spirit. It highlighted that the experience of the MS Church was of a God who is very much a part of their history, empowering them to *participate in the decision-making* and the work of God’s Kingdom in their midst. The preference for the poor and marginalized was thematized also during the conference.²⁶ The gathering finished electing yet another layperson as Executive Secretary Alberto Cacayan and there were some encouraging signs

²² François Houtart came to the Philippines in 1975 and held a month-long seminar in Baguio City on Marxist structural analysis. Houtart is the founder of CETRI (*Centre Tricontinental*) in Louvain-la-Neuve in 1976. He served in Vatican II as secretary in the sub-committee that helped draft the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).

²³ Claver, “The History of BCCs: Philippines,” 21.

²⁴ Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, 50.

²⁵ Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 21.

²⁶ Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, 50.

for the continuation of the conference. This however proved to be short-lived when in 1982 the Mindanao Bishops declared that they wanted to dissociate themselves from the Board. The drama had been painful for the parties involved and several issues needed to be resolved for the sake of the conference itself. Foremost among these was the nature of the conference itself. It was perceived by some Bishops that the Board had mistakenly thought that the conference was a kind of supra-ecclesial reality above the local churches of Mindanao. Thus, in the meeting during MSPC IV, it was reiterated in unfortunately canonical-sounding words that "MSPC is not a juridical body with an authority over the local church. It is not a Parliament able to deliberate and set forth directions with the force of law, hence, it does not make compulsory decisions or policies by majority vote nor by the strength of delegation or representation. The authority of the MSPC rests solely on the power of the ideas, and the bond of unity that binds the Church together... The MSPC is not even a consultative body, in the way that there is a distinction between deliberative and consultative functions which decision makers at the local churches have to attend to in mapping out their courses of action. They can consult it of course, but they are not bound to it by any legal necessity."²⁷ Another important issue that contributed to the decision of the Bishops to dissociate themselves from the Board was the suspicion that the Board was already ideologically aligned more with the Communist Party than with the Catholic Church.²⁸ The announcement of the dissociation of the bishops came as a surprise to many of the MSPC staff since the idea was hatched by Bishop Claver who was once among those who defended the Board.²⁹ It was thought that when the MSPC Board accepted the

²⁷ "Dialogue with the Bishops on MSPC," MSPC IV Proceedings (1980), 35.

²⁸ *Proceedings of the M-S Bishops with the MSPC Board and the Secretariate*, 8 March 1982, Davao City, 8.

²⁹ One of the implications of the ideological cleavage between Bishop Claver and the Board was the fact that Claver refused to support arm struggle as an option for socio-economic change in the Philippines. In one of the episodes before the dissociation the MSPC Secretariat refused to publish an important paper on non-violence that the bishops have to exert pressure to the Staff before the article would be printed. See, Mary Fitzpatrick, *Bishop Francisco Claver: On the Local Church* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1995), 46.

Marxist tools of analysis lock, stock, and barrel, the church became co-opted by the Left since to his mind the tools of analysis can be difficult to separate from the ideology that inspires it.³⁰

As a consequence, the dissociation of the bishops from the Board brought about the isolation of the latter. While the bishops continued to organize the MSPC directly under their supervision, the Board organized the Mindanao Interfaith People's Conference. The latter was however short-lived. The MSPC convened by the bishops continued to this day but with a much lesser role in terms of lay participation and initiative. The conference continues to promote an ecclesiology of the "people of God" even if it appears to be institutionally weaker and less efficient in terms of participative lay leadership. Bishop Claver believes that the initial thrust for forging a church 'from below' remains. He argues that even structurally it is weaker after the dissociation it will eventually strengthen itself because its strength is in its theological and pastoral nature which is communion.³¹ One can however argue that the best evidence that the thrust of the first MSPCs continues to live on is the existence of the myriad basic ecclesial communities that have taken root all over Mindanao.³² The spirit of the earlier MSPCs is embodied in the lay leaders who have lent their talents and their time to organize their fellow peasants in the struggle for integral evangelization. The orientation of the conference lives on in the commitment of the catechists working in the far-flung barrios to educate the young and old alike regarding the relevance of Christianity in the midst of an oppressive and unjust regime.³³

PART II: SOME ECCLESIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The "Pentecostal" event which was the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference is an important reference point when one talks about what it means to be a church in the southern islands of the country. For the initiators and actors of MSPC, there was no doubt that it was inspired by the fusion of the horizons between the

³⁰ Claver, "The History of BCCs Philippines," 21.

³¹ Fitzpatrick, *Bishop Francisco Claver: On the Local Church*, 47.

³² Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, 63.

³³ Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 25.

context of Mindanao and the renewal of the Church promulgated by Vatican II. MSPC was a watershed event in the history of the local church in Mindanao because “it led to the opening of doors within the Church and to closer contacts with the poor to become responsive to their needs.”³⁴ In the preceding pages, we have given an overview of the events surrounding the MSPC’s inception; the issues the various stakeholders were grappling and the eventual painful dissociation by the bishops from the MSPC Board and Secretariat in the early 80s. Perhaps some will see the MSPC experience through the eyes of skepticism: a failed post-conciliar ecclesiological experiment.

Judgments aside, one can take the position that the MSPC experience is part of the growth pains and birth pangs of a church fully invested in becoming a local church immersed in the struggles of its people. And accompanying these pains are the underlying issues in ecclesiology. A cursory look at the perspectives being put forward would seem to reveal that the participants were holding on to different ecclesiological presuppositions and the much-needed convergence of ideas among the key players themselves sadly appeared to be absent. While there seemed to be a collective excitement about appropriating the reforms of Vatican II, there appeared to be unchecked assumptions as to the framework and content of this appropriation.

At an interpretive level, there seemed to be a gap that needed filling up vis-à-vis what is regarded by Acerbi (and other commentators of the documents of Vatican II) as an unresolved conflict between a more juridical ecclesiology and the understanding of the church as communion.³⁵ One can even take this discussion to a more nuanced debate between the ecclesiologies

³⁴ Karl Gaspar, “Contextualized Theology” in *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*, 136-37

³⁵ See, Antonio Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie: Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella Lumen Gentium* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1975); Henri Holstein, *Hiérarchie et Peuple de Dieu d’après Lumen Gentium* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1970); Herman Pottmeyer, “Continuità e innovazione nell’ecclesiologia del Vaticano II,” *L’ ecclesiologia del Vaticano II: dinamismi e prospettive*, ed. G. Alberigo (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Die Kirche als Sacrament im Horizont der Welterfahrung in Anschluss an das II Vatikanische Konzil* (Paderborn: Bonifacius, 1971).

of communion and the People of God.³⁶ When five bishops of Mindanao questioned the nature of the MSPC, the co-chairman of the Board Bishop Claver clarified that theologically the conference was a communion of Churches. In the mind of Claver, the term communion implies the attributes of “cooperation and coordination, mutual assistance and sharing of resources, constant intercommunication and support of one another, and perhaps most importantly, openness to one another and the Spirit in the context of loyalty to and union with Peter.”³⁷ It appears that in this list of attributes Claver focuses more on pastoral mutuality between the local churches on the one hand, and the dynamics of ‘loyalty and daring’ on the other. It seems that for him, these attributes play an indispensable role in defining the nature and relationship of MSPC with the local churches of Mindanao. Claver points out that the crux of the matter should lie in the uncompromising acceptance of the ‘autonomy of the local church.’³⁸ This means that in Claver’s mind, the MSPC cannot act as a super-church with the authority to legislate and implement on behalf of each local church. The local church “can accept or refuse recommendations made by the Board or the Conference itself ... for common solutions to common problems.”³⁹

Finding this difficult from the perspective of implementing pastoral reforms, it was pointed out that to wait until the dioceses reach the level of post-Vatican II Church before the Board does its job is not viable. And to “play 20 different personalities” according to the different “personalities of the dioceses” is “impossible and impractical” as it can lead to “pastoral schizophrenia.”⁴⁰ This argument seems to be connected with the fact that the Board believes that it is accountable to the Conference which includes the whole of the People of God of Mindanao-Sulu rather than just one

³⁶ See for example, Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

³⁷ Francisco Claver, “The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference: The Pains of Growth,” in *Philippine Priests Forum*

11 no. 4 (December 1979): 15-19, 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Karl Gaspar, “MSPC: Pains of Growth Continued,” in *MSPC Communications* 33 (January-June 1980): 2-4, 4.

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sector in it.⁴¹ It appeared to some that a conflict area in the MSPC may be located in how the “People of God ecclesiology” is understood/appropriated “in the context of the emerging grassroots Church.”⁴² Commenting on the ecclesiological differences in MSPC, Alberto Cacayan (Executive Secretary of MSPC 1980-83 until the Dissociation) writes:

The Board and the Secretariat recognize the leadership of the bishops in the Church understood as People of God but understand authority and leadership as the responsibility to serve the people effectively and efficaciously. Hence, authority emanating from ecclesiastical ordination is made more authentic in their being one with people as true servants. The Board and the Secretariat pursue co-responsibility and participation in the Church which are the hallmarks of Vatican II and do challenge the monarchical powers of the hierarchy which are obstacles to genuine participation. They hold that the MSPC Board and the Secretariat are accountable to the Conference.⁴³

It is quite evident that this view of the Church exhibits resonances with Leonardo Boff’s interpretation of the People of God ecclesiology emphasizing on equality of baptismal dignity of Christians. The different charisms therefore are but expressions of this one baptismal grace. Power is understood as service to the People of God. Boff was of course defining his position against a hierarchical notion of the church which he claims is not completely expunged in Vatican II, especially in the third chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. If one comes from a hermeneutic of suspicion, one can misconstrue the assertion of the autonomy of the local church as an overzealous protection of the power of the individual bishops. In and by itself, this would appear to be an incomplete reading since this seemed to have not taken into account the patristic understanding of the local church that lies at the very heart of the

⁴¹ See, *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*, 22.

⁴³ Alberto Cacayan, “The Old Wineskins Are Bursting,” in *MSPC V Proceedings*, 117.

la nouvelle théologie. The retrieval of the ecclesiality of the local church was hinged on the ecclesiological perspective of the unity of the bishop, the church, and the Eucharist. The pastoral theologian-bishop Ignatius of Antioch regards the person and authority of the bishop as constitutive to the existence of the church and sacraments.⁴⁴

Some Methodological Considerations

The ecclesiological impasse was further muddled by the tendency to interchange the terms ‘people of God’ and ‘people’s church’ in the gatherings, teach-ins, and conference proceedings. The latter of course brings to mind the ideological underpinnings of terms used by the Communist Party of the Philippines in the 70’s. The term people’s church seems to conveniently forget the phrase ‘of God.’ This linguistic analysis is important since in the critique of Ratzinger leveled against liberation theologians, the former indicts the latter of seeing the church from a purely sociological and ideological point of view.⁴⁵ The analysis of the MSPC conflict/contradiction seems to be based on Hegelian dialectics influencing the Marxist reading of class struggle as applied to the Church: “The contradiction does not seem to be uniquely ecclesiastical, not is it exclusive to the church body. Rather it would seem to be organically latched on to the conflict of interests in society between the ruling elite and the toiling masses.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “See that you all follow the Bishop, as Christ does the Father, and the presbyterium as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as a command of God. Let no one do anything connected with the Church without the Bishop. Let that be considered a certain (bebaia) Eucharist which is under the leadership of the Bishop, or one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the Bishop appears, there let the multitude of the people be; just as wherever Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not permitted without the Bishop either to baptize or to celebrate an agape; but whatever he shall approve of, that is well-pleasing also to God so that everything that is done may be assured and certain.”, St. Ignatius of Antioch, “Epistle to the Smyrneans, Chapter 8,” *The Ante Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*: Vol. I, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: Clark 1996), 89-90. This was at the foundation of the retrieval of the local church as a fullest manifestation of the church. See, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* nos. 41; 42.

⁴⁵ Cacayan, “The Old Wineskins Are Bursting,” 117.

During the meetings before the Dissociation, the Board seems to open itself up to the many proposals of the bishops except for one: for the Board to be put under the supervision of the Bishops.⁴⁶ The explicit reason for this was because the Board is accountable to the people of God in the Conference. The implicit reason appears to be based on a firm epistemological assumption that the Board and/or Secretariat represent the will of the 'toiling masses' of the conference not of the hierarchy. What seems to be happening here is that a model of governance and ideological vision is projected into the Church. The interpretation of the MSPC experience based on the Marxist idea of class struggle holds when one sees it in terms of the conflict "between the elitist Church which legitimizes and reinforces the interests of the powerful bloc and the emerging people's Church which aims at the liberation of the oppressed and the transformation of society into a more just and human world."⁴⁷

As in any binary oppositional reading, this appears not to take into account the complexities on the ground. It appears to presuppose that there are 'solid' monochromatic factions even among and within the hierarchy. For example, it would seem that the bishops were themselves aware that there were those among them who were hesitant to implement the reforms of Vatican II.⁴⁸ Moreover, it seems that even among those who committed themselves to allowing the Spirit of the Council to renew the Mindanao Church, the positions were quite diverse and they cannot be lumped into one ideological color. Some bishops did not have any qualms in abolishing the MSPC.⁴⁹ On the other hand, many of the bishops were trailblazers in the MS Church. Bishop Morelos of Butuan for example was the one who first gave an

⁴⁶ "The Board accepted virtually all the guidelines proposed by the Bishops except their move to place the MSPC Secretariat under the supervision and control of the Mindanao Sulu Bishops. The Conference entrusted the Board with the duty of providing guidance and exercising supervision over the operations of the MSPCS and it is only the Conference that can take that away." *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁸ See Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities*, 18-21

⁴⁹ One bishop reportedly quipped: "I would have no difficulties were the MSPC to disappear tomorrow." Karl Gaspar, "The Local Church and Militant Lay Participation: The MSPC Experience," in *Pro Mundi Vita* 3 (1985): 1-29, 14.

eloquent articulation of the metaphors used by the Board to symbolize the emerging people's church of Mindanao.⁵⁰ Moreover, Bishop Claver who had verbalized the initial directions of the theology behind MSPC is certifiably a prophetic figure in the Mindanao-Sulu Church.⁵¹

Another related but essential aspect of the debate is the use of mediations in the theological methodology involved in the dynamic of re-contextualization in MSPC. There appear to be three positions vis-à-vis mediations from social sciences. First, the Board believes that their re-appropriation of the concept of People of God along the lines of Marxist structural analysis was seen to be a Pentecostal event - to be the new wine - that will transform the traditional hierarchical church into a people's church. From this position, one indeed can be critical of the "neutrality" argument that some quarters in the hierarchy are espousing: "In the abstract metaphysical realm, the Church can maintain a neutral, 'middle-of-the-road' line. But in the concrete sociological and historical context, where the mode of production is dissymmetrical, even its seemingly-neutral position carries with it a social meaning which favors either the preservation of the status quo or its transformation."⁵²

The second stance is the reactionary conservative ideology held by some bishops who were suspicious of the lay initiative and who were averse to a participative model of governance in the church. This group seems to be coming from the assumption that there is an "uncontaminated" kernel that can be transferred "objectively" from one context to another without being "affected" by the situation. Their "paraxial" posture regarding MSPC quite obviously betrays a certain epistemological presupposition. Such a

⁵⁰ This metaphor was based on the parable of the new wine in old wineskins. In a homily Morelos reflects: "We know the price for the fresh wines of participation and co-responsibility. Do we preserve this wine in new wineskins, so that it can age and mature, into the best wine of all? Or do we reject the new wine in favor of keeping the old?" Bishop Carmelo D.F. Morelos, "Homily at Opening Liturgy," in MSPC III Proceedings, 2 as quoted in Karl Gaspar, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church*, 20.

⁵¹ Kinne, *The Splintered Staff*, 111

⁵² Cacayan, "The Old Wineskins Are Bursting," in *Communications* 39 (August 1982), 118.

position believes in theology as the ‘queen’ of sciences which is self-sufficient in articulating its rationality vis-à-vis experience. However, the movement of re-contextualization would expose the limits of the aforementioned position. Re-contextualization shows us that theology has been borrowing the language of philosophy and social sciences to articulate its relevance to human experience. And in the process of articulation, the language of philosophy acquires a different meaning- entails a different experience.

A current example would be the term “communion” which has been used by the synod on Synodality and mainstreamed in the 1985 Synod of Bishops as the synthesizing ecclesiological concept of Vatican II.⁵³ In his seminal book, *Being as Communion*,⁵⁴ John Zizioulas was labeled as a closet existentialist in his appropriation of communion in his analysis of the movement from the hypostasis of biological existence to the hypostasis of ecclesial existence. Moreover, the categories of participation, co-responsibility, and mutuality as the organizing ideas of MSPC and the Synod on Synodality are indeed categories borrowed from personalist philosophies in the 60’s. Such terms acquire a theological meaning when they are re-appropriated for Christian praxis. If this intuition is pursued, the objection regarding the use of Marxist tools of social analysis seems overstated. This concern, however, is shared for example by the likes of Ratzinger who would warn theologians that Marxist social analysis might compromise the Christian faith because the tools of analysis cannot be separated from the ideology.⁵⁵ “Anyone who makes Marx the philosopher of theology adopts the primacy of politics and economics, which now become the real powers that can bring about salvation.”⁵⁶ The aforementioned concern is also shared by postmodern theologians

⁵³1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, “Message and Final Report,” in *One in Christ* 22 (1986): 80-98, 91.

⁵⁴ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: Crestwood, 1984).

⁵⁵ See also Joseph Ratzinger, “Preface to the New Edition,” *Introduction to Christianity*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 2004), 14-16. See, Mary Fitzpatrick, *Francisco Claver: On the Local Church*, 45. Ratzinger for example famously accused Kasper of the tendency of sociological reductionism in former’s debate with the latter on the relationship between universal and local church.

⁵⁶ Ratzinger, “Preface to the New Edition,” *Introduction to Christianity*, 4th ed., 15.

particularly John Milbank agrees with the assault of liberation theologies in the contemporary period albeit for a different reason. Ostensibly repudiating liberation theology as appropriating the Marxist modern master narrative, Milbank seems to distance himself from any secular mediation for theology. “The only gaze it needs is its gaze to assess things in the light of God.”⁵⁷ Thus borrowing the words of Aquinas, Milbank describes theology as “formally about God and materially about everything else, in so far as it relates to God.”⁵⁸

The third position is composed of those who were ‘caught in the crossfire’ between the first two positions. This position is aware of the ideologies at work in MSPC but wanted to propose an ecclesiological posture that retains a ‘catholic’ particularity. It appears that this is represented by bishops like Escaler, Morelos, Claver, and Bishop Tudtod. The early Claver was open to radical changes and the methodology of Marxist structural analysis but he wanted to assert that the methodologies of praxial engagement are always at the service of the “catholic” particularity. This was the reason why the later Claver was insistent that the church could not go with ‘armed struggle’ in theory and practice because the non-violent stance of the church is what differentiates it from the dogmatic Marxist revolutionaries. Some authors are having difficulty grappling with the fact that Claver who was supposed to be a progressive bishop was the one who breached the idea of Dissociation.

One could think that his position can be explained by the fact that the later Claver believes that the Board was no longer able to be reflexive in their accommodation of Marxism and was no longer equipped to differentiate between method and content in the appropriation. It seemed therefore to be a case of a hasty Christian baptism of Marxism.⁵⁹ In short, perhaps in the mind of Claver, in the meeting of the text and context, the Christian particularity has suffered beyond fix. And being the bearers of Christian particularity, Claver felt that the bishops have to dissociate themselves from the Board. This move was eventually

⁵⁷ Georges De Schrijver, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe: Their Impact on Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004), 73.

⁵⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 235.

⁵⁹ For related methodological points, see, Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain: Peeters, 2003).

perceived to be aligned with the position held by the conservatives who were suspicious of any theoretical-praxial mediation whether Marxist or otherwise. From the perspective of their critics, it seemed that the progressive middle-way position was eventually co-opted by the traditional bishops. This resulted to the well-documented hardening of positions from both sides. Indeed, what seemed to be absent in the whole affair was the willingness of some parties to forge a constructive dialogue in threshing out the relationships, intersections, or even tactical alliances between the Marxist mediation and catholic particularity.

PART III: INTUITIONS FOR A FRAMEWORK OF A MINDANAOAN SYNODAL CHURCH

Drawing from the experience of MSPC, one can perhaps say that the continuing but changing context of Mindanao necessitates a formulation of a current ecclesiological imaginary without necessarily rejecting the previous one.⁶⁰ The 70s were marked with the zeal and fervor of a church desirous to forge an identity and craft a paraxial stance that addresses a context of poverty and oppression coupled with a church renewing itself from a Tridentine ecclesiology that may be described as *societas perfecta hierarchica inequalis*. The contextual response of MSPC as it sought to incarnate a participatory church was marked with struggle and painful conflict. Learning from the struggles of the 70s how might a framework of a synodal church look like in our times? Perhaps the initial proposals of the synod on synodality can help us in this. In the preparatory document for the synod on synodality, Francis emphasized that journeying together “requires listening to the Holy Spirit,” who like the wind “blows where it wills; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (Jn. 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will

⁶⁰ In the formulation of this ecclesiological imaginary vis-a-vis the ‘wounds’ in MSPC, the proposal of this paper relates to some extent to the “long convalescence” dynamic described by Gianni Vattimo when he contrasts *Verwindung* with an *Überwindung* (overcoming) or an *Aufhebung* (dialectical overcoming in the Hegelian sense). See, Randy J.C. Odchigue, “The Radical Kenoticism of Gianni Vattimo and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 16 no. 2 (2006): 173-189.

certainly prepare for us along the way.”⁶¹ This listening to the Holy Spirit opens the opportunity to “imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions.”⁶²

The synodal plea for a renewal of the church as part of the journeying together in history⁶³ is complemented by the awareness that “the Church’s synodal journey is oriented toward the Kingdom.”⁶⁴ The synodal synthesis recognizes how the Eastern Churches can enrich the whole church theologically and ecclesiologicaly. Following this, the pneumatological approaches of Walter Kasper and John Zizioulas have a significant impact on the relationship between the missionary-historical renewal forcefully emphasized by the Synod on Synodality and the eschatological orientation of the synodal church that lies at the center of the Eastern theological intuition.

Traditionally, the tension between the missionary-historical and the eucharistic-eschatological pneumatologies would lead to an opposing emphasis between activism on the one hand and triumphalism on the other. Kasper points out that the Holy Spirit “makes known to the church ever new missionary opportunities” and “he urges the church to heed his action in the ‘signs of the times.’”⁶⁵ This Western perspective looks at the function of the Holy Spirit as bringing “what happened in Jesus once and for all to fulfillment in the Church and world history.”⁶⁶ Coming from a eucharistic-eschatological perspective of Pneumatology, Zizioulas emphasizes the need for fundamental pneumatological conditioning of Christology enabling the church to acquire an eschatological posture in its involvement in the world. When this attitude becomes embedded in the church, Zizioulas argues, “worship and social action, sacred and profane, are no longer two different domains... the mission of the church is not an attitude vis-à-vis the world, but a compassionate and sanctifying presence in

⁶¹ Preparatory Document for Synod on Synodality 2021-23, no. 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, no. 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report, 2.b.

⁶⁶ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 229

⁶⁶ Walter Kasper, “The Renewal of Pneumatology in Contemporary Catholic Life and Theology: Towards a Rapprochement between East and West,” 102.

it.”⁶⁷ But while Zizioulas believes that there are ethical implications of an eschatological position, he readily confesses that the church can never identify the eschaton with history.⁶⁸ Responding to the modern Marxist polemics, Zizioulas argues that the kingdom of God is not a result of a historical process. Why is this important for the framework of a synodal church in mission?

The reactionary conservative quarters are accusing the framework, process, content and even the choice of the participants of the synod on synodality as espousing a very particular Western liberal agenda projected into the church. A cursory look at the discussions, convergences, and even the proposals of the synthesis document may reveal that an Eastern perspective of eschaton does not seem to be given enough space that in turn can make the synod vulnerable to such an unwarranted critique. The presence of an Eastern perspective of the eschaton in history guarantees openness in the discourse of communion because it points to something beyond what is manipulable - it points “to the unobjectifiable, uncontrollable, extraordinary ‘beyond.’”⁶⁹ More than being a polemic directed against unconditional linear historicism, this intuition tells us that the church should open itself for this “spiritual excess” as it reveals itself in what Kasper terms as the “signs of the times.” This point helps us to articulate the challenge that a Mindanaoan ecclesiological imaginary is called to be attentive to the ‘movement of the Spirit’ beyond the institutional and dogmatic parameters of the church.

This openness in ecclesiology secures the space of a personal eschatological Other who interrupts history. Zizioulas believes that the interruption of the eschaton in history cannot be associated with claims to conceptual or ideological supremacy. The church according to Zizioulas must be ready to confess her “tactical inferiority” compared to other ideological views of history. This point is relevant in so far as the Christian discourse rises to the challenge to remain humble in its claims to history, church renewal, and reform. Admittedly, this has to be balanced

⁶⁷ John Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension of the Church,” 156.

⁶⁸ The synodal synthesis has emphasized this too. See, *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report*, 2.b.

⁶⁹ Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension of the Church,” 156.

with prophetic engagement too. For indeed as Zizioulas argues, the sacramental and eschatological view of institutions continually constituted and reconstituted by the Spirit has tremendous political consequences.⁷⁰ Indeed, emphasis on an Eastern perspective of the eschaton should not be interpreted as being opposed to praxial engagement.⁷¹ What is simply secured here is for ecclesiology and praxis not to fall into the trap of materialist eschatology with its tendency to regard the reign of God as a result of a linear historical process. In Zizioulas' framework, the eschaton is the norm for iconic engagement in history.

The Eastern view of the "normativity" of the eschaton in Zizioulas finds a more Western articulation in the concept of the "normativity of the future" as developed by Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer.⁷² These two authors developed this concept from their respective fields of ethics and exegesis. The question from which this framework issues forth is, "In which way the Bible, a text of the past, can be meaningful, relevant, and maybe even normative and authoritative for people who live today and in the future?"⁷³ Bieringer proposes that to answer this question one has to complement the synchronic and diachronic readings with a "metachronic" approach.

This approach issues from a double re-appropriation of, first, Gadamer's literary category called the "classical" which is "significant in itself and interprets itself" speaking directly to the

⁷⁰ Zizioulas, "Action and Icon," 69.

⁷¹ In recent literature there seems to be a renewal of interest in of praxial engagement in Orthodox theology. See, Emmanuel Clapsis, ed., *Violence and Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Conversation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007); John Breck, *Longing for God: Orthodox Reflections on Bible, Ethics and Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2006); John Breck, *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005).

⁷² See, Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times in Light of the Gospel: Vision and Normativity of the Future," lecture delivered in an Expert Seminar on *Gaudium et Spes* at the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, 2004.

⁷³ Reimund Bieringer, "Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology," *Bulletin ET* 8 (1997): 52-67, 53.

readers independent of temporal or spatial distance⁷⁴ and, second, of Ricoeur's idea that texts have a surplus meaning that transcends the author's intention. In his hermeneutics, Ricoeur is convinced that in some texts the reader encounters a "second-order reference, namely the world of the text or a projected world which enables these texts to transcend time and space."⁷⁵ Developing and applying these insights into the biblical texts, Bieringer argues that these texts have a metachronic feature – a dimension that transcends the past and present into a future projected by the texts themselves. Moving beyond Ricoeur, Bieringer points out that in his proposal of the hermeneutics of the future, the texts are regarded as symbols and sacraments where the community encounters the divine mystery.⁷⁶ While it seems that in following Ricoeur, the framework tends to view the future as some historical projection, Bieringer reverses the whole dynamics when he argues that "religious texts are icons, windows into the mysterious reality of the future which God has in store for all of creation."⁷⁷ Instead therefore of an "idolatrous gaze" into the future, the iconic idea opens up a space in history for the eschaton.⁷⁸

Bieringer's proposal is eschatological- in close conjunction with Zizioulas' idea of the eschaton as the source of an ecclesiological ethos. Put simply, eschaton is primarily the 'interruption' of God in history. In a way that completely resonates with the point of Kasper,⁷⁹ Elsbernd, and Bieringer "see 'signs of

⁷⁴ Reimund Bieringer, "Texts that Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today," Unpublished Essay, *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, 2007, 11. See, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 285-290, esp. 289.

⁷⁵ Bieringer, "Texts that Create a Future..." 12.

⁷⁶ Bieringer points out his differences with Ricoeur on this regard as the latter believes that the task of interpretation is: "to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text. ... what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text". Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 86. See, Bieringer, "Texts that Create a Future..." 8, 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁸ From a phenomenological point of view, the contrast between the idol and the icon is threshed out in detail by Jean- Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 23-24.

⁷⁹ See, Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 229.

the times' as places where the in-breaking of God's future into the world can occur. As such they are constitutively eschatological. The new epochal developments in our world are not just that, but they are at least potentially the tangible representations of how God enters into this world and moves it toward its final destination."⁸⁰ The Holy Spirit's role as framed in the synodal preparatory document, *Instrumentum Laboris*, and the synthesis document may be complemented with the aforementioned intuitions. "Through the working of the Holy Spirit the in-breaking of God's future, the realization of God's dream for the world is realized. The Holy Spirit enables persons and communities to participate in the realization of this dream."⁸¹ While remaining thoroughly eschatological, this approach is deeply rooted in history. This synthesis accommodates both God's eschatological in-breaking into the world through the Holy Spirit and the agency of men and women to become active participants and co-workers in God's synodal mission. Against devotional passivity, this approach is praxis-oriented. As we have demonstrated already this approach sharpens the proposals of Kasper and Zizioulas, and I argue it is most relevant to our proposal for a Mindanaoan ecclesiological imaginary for the following reasons.

First, this synthesis challenges the prevailing ecclesiological situation in many parts of Mindanao and the Philippines from its mainly devotional-sacramental passivity towards practical engagement. It is often said that Filipinos are sacramentalized but not evangelized. This is often labeled a split-level Christianity.⁸² The approach of the normativity of the future combines the celebration of the sacraments and their devotional aspect to an awareness of the implication of this celebration in everyday life. A proper synthesis of eschatology and history brings about a holistic ecclesiological

⁸⁰ See, Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times in Light of the Gospel: Vision and Normativity of the Future," 80.

⁸¹ Bieringer, "Texts that Create a Future...," 15.

⁸² See, Jaime Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1992). The phrase split-level Christianity is used by Bulatao as early as 1962 in order to refer to the inability of Christian values to be integrated fully into the life of the Filipino. Such dynamics are often applied to what is commonly known in the Philippines as "Sunday Catholics" who are often accused of a "skin-deep" commitment to Christian faith.

outlook where worship and social-historical action occupy the same place of engagement.

Secondly, the framework of the normativity of the future is important to the lessons learned in the experience of the MSPC experiment. In the course of our research, we have found out that ideology whether left or right played a crucial role in the debacle of the Conference. The framework is a good corrective because its norm lies not in any form of ideology or philosophy. The criterion of praxis is the vision of God for the future as interpreted by a community of believers in the founding texts of the Bible in a manner that is not only diachronic or synchronic but also metachronic. Specifically, Bieringer argues that the content of God's vision of the world is an "inclusivity that makes possible a future for all."⁸³ The very thing that the Synod on Synodality argues for. Methodologically, against any rightist or leftist ideology; or any sociological reductionism, we argue that the norm for any praxial stance in our ecclesiological proposal is precisely the content of God's vision for the future as interpreted by the Christian community within the interplay between the biblical texts and the signs of the times. And against any relativist claim, we argue that there is indeed a need for normativity beyond any narrow subjectivist and perspectival claims.

Thirdly, the framework is relevant to our proposal in its emphasis on dialogue and relationality. The reading of the signs in relation to the texts and their paradigmatic value for the future precludes any truth claim that is handed down "from above." What is at work here is a kind of hermeneutics of communion whereby the whole Christian community becomes active participants in the process of interpretation and re-appropriation. This is a double-edged corrective rousing the lay Filipino Christian from his or her devotional slumber, and rebuking any hierarchical hegemony. In this way, the church can perhaps recuperate its appeal of creative engagement because it ceases to be a possession of one sector in the church. As Bishop Bacani points out, the church moves "from the

⁸³ See, Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times in Light of the Gospel: Vision and Normativity of the Future," 60.

Sila (They) Church to the *Tayo* (We, All of us together) Church.”⁸⁴ In this model of ecclesiology, the church is not seen as imposing insensitive rigoristic demands on the laity from above but presents radical challenges that are based on the interpretation and appropriation of the gospel according to the concrete experiences of the people.⁸⁵

Finally, while the proposal of the normativity of the future is an eschatological appeal, it also fixes its eyes on the thoroughly historical character of praxis. This attention to history connects with our concern for the local and the particular. Bieringer argues that “in this eschatological hermeneutic the task of the reading community with regard to the ancient text is not to repeat it, to reenact it as if it was a script for their lives. Nor is their task to re-contextualize its timeless core. The past text has passed and cannot be resuscitated. Perhaps one could say that the text or eventual character of an experience does not have intrinsic, but paradigmatic value.”⁸⁶ What this argues for is the fact that the process of interpretation occurs in a manner that is unique to the context of the interpreters’ experiences. The text is affected as it affects the readers. This means according to Bieringer “that the reading community has the task of reading and internalizing the ancient text as the first chapters of a chain novel of which they have to write the next chapter.”⁸⁷ If this is so then the ‘writing’ of the narrative of discipleship is inescapably local in character because particular experiences that shape the response of the readers happen within a specific and concrete spatio-temporal context. In the case of Mindanao, the “writing” of the narrative of faith-response happens in the paradoxes we experience amid environmental destruction, displacement, and dispossession of the Lumads, in the fight for the Bangsamoro self-determination and the crusade of the church of

⁸⁴ Teodoro Bacani, *Towards the Third Millenium: The PCP II Vision*, 25. The Filipino pronouns “*silá*” (they) and “*tayo*” (us, we) are used as contrast of the movement from an exclusive pyramidal hierarchology to a more communitarian circle of disciples.

⁸⁵ On a parallel reflection on the point of ‘radicalism instead of rigorism’, see, Johann Baptist-Metz, *The Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 8-9.

⁸⁶ Bieringer, “Texts that Create a Future...,” 15.

⁸⁷ Reimund Bieringer, “Texts that Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today,” 15.

the poor for comprehensive socio-economic reforms.

CONCLUSION: SPIRITUALITY OF INTERRUPTION

The synodal challenge of finding new ways of being church and going the other way than usual is exciting and daunting. As the members of the church go back or continue on another way it might be helpful to humbly recognize that God can interrupt and irrupt or even disrupt our synodal. This spirituality urges stakeholders of the MS Church to be humbler. MSPC as a conference is at the service of our local church which in its turn is at the service of a concrete community. As its history tells us, MSPC is at home on the rough grounds of human experience. This too is something we can cherish that Mindanao church is immersed in the existential – its habitat is the paradoxes of a church struggling to flourish in a land of contestation; it seeks to thrive in an ecological field unrepentantly ravaged by corporate interests; it struggles to incarnate itself in a people holding on to faith, hope, and love despite a situation of poverty – a church still in via, of a people also on its way.

Some people appear to be impatient or too critical and sometimes some quarters are trying to push for a position that our resolutions and agreements at MSPC should be indubitable or else they are judged to be unreliable and ineffective. The answer to the spirituality of interruption lies along the trenches of epistemic humility and prophetic certitude of hope. Because Christians are synodal pilgrims, people of God, our resolutions and statements cannot be a discourse of those who have reached their destination. Even our prophetic work for social justice and the environment is informed by humility that we are doing this without any messianic complex. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of confusing being on the way to reaching the goal.⁸⁸ Until beatific vision then all ‘certitudes’ must be read under the rubric of hope but also of the openness that God can revise, displace, and shake that which we hold as foundations, theological interpretations, and pastoral practice. All

⁸⁸ See, Miroslav Volf, “The Challenge of Protestant Fundamentalism,” in *Concilium* (1992/3): 97-106, 97.

this is just simply to say that we are all dependent on the grace of God in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

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