

REIMAGINING *BAYANIHAN* AS A MODEL OF SYNODALITY IN THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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This paper explores the indigenous Filipino tradition of bayanihan as a theological model of synodality in the Catholic Church. Rooted in the spirit of communal solidarity, bayanihan reflects the synodal themes of participation, communion, and mission. This study employs José de Mesa's method of inculturation, which urges Filipinos to reclaim the wisdom of their culture in interpreting and appropriating the Gospel. Through the lens of inculturation, this study seeks to deepen its relevance in the Philippine ecclesial context. It draws insights from two significant reports submitted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to the Vatican: The Salubong report (August 15, 2022) and the Salya report (July 12, 2024). These documents capture the voices of Filipino Catholics as they participate in the synodal journey. This paper argues that Bayanihan offers an inculturated synodality model that captures the synodal themes of participation, communion, and mission for Filipinos.

Keywords: Bayanihan, synodality; Filipino Value, theology, CBCP, Philippine tradition

INTRODUCTION

The recently concluded Synod on Synodality in 2021-2024 continues to inspire people from all lifestyles, families, parishes, dioceses, movements, and small Christian communities. Synodality is not only an ecclesiological theory but also a praxis: a

“journey,” a “process,” and a “concrete experience.”¹ The *Synthesis Report* highlighted key themes of “communion, participation, and mission.”² Following an international consultation, Pope Francis entrusted these themes to Study Groups³ composed of pastors and theologians from across the globe, tasking them to use in their work the synodal approach. The *Final Document of the XVI Assembly*⁴ states that,

the local Churches are asked to continue their daily journey with a synodal methodology of consultation and discernment, identifying concrete ways and formation pathways to bring about a tangible synodal conversion in the various ecclesial contexts (i.e. parishes, Institutes of consecrated life, and Societies of apostolic life, movements of the faithful, dioceses, Episcopal Conferences, groupings of Churches, etc.).⁵

¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session, October 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf.

² XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” 4-29 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.1.0.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

³ General Secretariat of the Synod, “For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, Mission: Preparatory Document (2021), <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-third-phase/study-groups-for-questions-raised-in-the-first-session-of-the-xvi-assembly.html>

⁴ It is interesting to note that Pope Francis had decided not to follow the custom of releasing a post-synodal apostolic exhortation. Instead, the Pope said he was confirming the final document personally, adopting it into his own ordinary papal magisterium. According to Pope Francis’ 2018 apostolic exhortation *Episcopalis communio*, the final document “participates in the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter,” if it is expressly approved by the pope. See Francis, *Episcopalis communio*, September 15, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.

⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document”

However, the ongoing synodal process has faced challenges in understanding or applying some key theological concepts due to their ambiguity and lack of precision. Even the October 2023 Synod assembly recognized the need to deepen and clarify the meaning of synodality at various levels.⁶ Synodality risks being perceived as overly vague, generic, or merely a passing trend rather than a genuine expression of the Church's mission and communion without such theological clarity. Hence, the need for a Filipino model of synodality arises from the distinct socio-cultural, historical, and religious context of the Philippines, which requires a localized approach to synodality.

The *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (PCP II) asserts that “[For] Faith to mature in love, it must be interiorized. Church teachings and practices must be personally appreciated and appropriated by us, as a people with our own particular culture, with our own ways of thinking and valuing, Faith must take root in the matrix of our Filipino being so that we may truly believe and love as Filipinos.”⁷ Jose de Mesa adds that for “theology to become a reality, reinterpretation of the Christian

Working Translation Original: Italian, 2-27 October 2024, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG--Documento-finale_traduzione-di-lavoro.pdf. (Hereafter cited as Final Document).

⁶ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” 4-29 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.1.0.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>. See Part 1-The Face of the Synodal Church, Matters of Consideration j: “j) Building on the reflective work already undertaken, there is a need to clarify the meaning of synodality at different levels, in pastoral, theological, and canonical terms. This helps to avert the risk that the concept sounds too vague or generic or appears as a fad or fashion. It enables us to offer a broad understanding of walking together with further theological deepening and clarification. Likewise, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between synodality and communion and between synodality and collegiality.”

⁷ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (PCP II) (Manila: CBCP, 1992), 72.

faith with indigenous categories is a must.”⁸ De Mesa urged theologians to use the two poles of theology namely: mutual dialogue between the Judeo-Christian Tradition and Contemporary Human Experiences.⁹ In “Linguistic Domination in Theology,” de Mesa urged theologians to use the Filipino language since it is the voice of the culture speaking in its own terms. He says that “If language enables people to think, then it is experientially very difficult to do so in the language that has been treated as inferior and marginalized during the colonial regime.”¹⁰

The Synod on Synodality reflects the Church's ongoing journey to fully embrace the Spirit of Vatican II, which sought to open the Church's windows to the world.¹¹ This global gathering of bishops and lay representatives reflects the universality of the Church and its responsiveness to the Spirit's surprises. It invites us to rediscover the theological and pastoral richness of a Church that is not merely hierarchical but fundamentally communal and participatory.¹² As Karl Rahner observed long ago, “The layman must do all he can to make his own personal contribution to the development of a public opinion within the Church.”¹³ In Filipino culture, *Bayanihan* represents the collective effort of a community to achieve a common goal, often illustrated in images of neighbors helping to relocate a nipa hut or the *bahay kubo*. The community

⁸ Jose de Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology: The Filipino Catholic Situation,” *Missiology* 26, no. 2 (1998): 191-200.

⁹ Jose de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1991), 5.

¹⁰ Jose de Mesa, “Linguistic Domination in Theology,” *Concilium* 1 (2018): 67-74.

¹¹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 67-69, 79-89.

¹² On this topic see Massimo Faggioli, “Vatican II and the Agenda for Collegiality and Synodality in the Twenty-First Century,” in *A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 229-53.

¹³ Karl Rahner, *Free Speech in the Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1959), 29.

pantries that emerged during the pandemic demonstrated that *Bayanihan* could also be a living expression of communion, participation, and mission—the pillars of synodality.

This paper seeks to reimagine *Bayanihan*, a Filipino tradition of walking together and communal journeying, as a model of synodality. It exemplifies a paradigm rooted in the interconnectedness and solidarity. The concept of this paper is *Bayanihan* can be leveraged to promote the three themes of synodality in the Catholic Church, namely, participation, communion, and mission. This exploration posits that an indigenous Filipino theology of *bayanihan* can serve as a potential model of synodality within the Philippine context. *Bayanihan* has been viewed as problematic, especially where people carrying the house are composed of males, but reimagining *Bayanihan* as a synodality where people become companions who will help move the Church forward. The paper begins with a discussion of some recent developments from the synod on synodality and includes some critiques of *Bayanihan* and the synodal process. The next section draws on the proposed model of synodality for the Philippine context and explores a mutual dialogue between contemporary human experiences and the official Church's teachings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs José de Mesa's method of inculturation, which encourages Filipinos to reclaim the resources of their culture to interpret and appropriate the message of the Gospel. Central to this approach is the de-stigmatization and re-valuing of Filipino cultural traditions, recognizing them as valid theological sources for understanding faith within a particular

context.¹⁴ By taking an appreciative stance toward culture, this study adopts inculturation as a lens in shaping the theological reflection on *Bayanihan*.¹⁵ The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) defines inculturation as inserting the Gospel into a culture and expressing it through the elements of that culture.¹⁶ Inculturation is “the endeavor and process of making the Gospel relevant and challenging in a particular culture.”¹⁷ For de Mesa, culture is a primary guide in inculturation. For him, there must be “mutual respect and critical interaction of Judeo-Christian Tradition and the culture.”¹⁸

Following de Mesa’s methodological approach,¹⁹ this paper highlights *Bayanihan* as a cultural framework that embodies the synodal themes of participation, communion, and mission. Instead of viewing *Synodality* through a Western ecclesiological lens, this study seeks to retrieve and reframe its theological significance by drawing from the Filipino cultural experience of *Bayanihan*. It is not only as a social value but also as a theological expression of shared faith and collective discernment. The study will engage in theological reflection by analyzing *Bayanihan* in light of Scripture, tradition, and contemporary church documents, particularly the *Salubong* (2022) and *Salya* (2024) reports submitted by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to the

¹⁴ de Mesa, “Tasks in the Inculturation of Theology” :195.

¹⁵ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002), 55.

¹⁶ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II)* (Manila: CBCP Secretariat, 1992), no 207.

¹⁷ Jose M. de Mesa and Rebecca Cacho, *Becoming Church Being Sacrament: A Filipino Ecclesiology for Students* (Manila: St. Scholastica’s College, 2012), 186.

¹⁸ José M. de Mesa, *Jose M. de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila, De La Salle University Press, 2016), 84.

¹⁹ José M. de Mesa, “Doing Theology as Inculturation in the Asian Context,” in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, eds. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 126.

Vatican. These reports are primary sources that articulate how Filipino Catholics understand and experience the synodal process.

***BAYANIHAN* IN THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND SACRED TRADITION**

The Filipino concept of *Bayanihan*, rooted in communal unity and mutual assistance, finds deep resonance within the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Sacred Tradition. Both the Old and New Testaments and the teachings of the Church emphasize themes of solidarity, self-giving, and shared responsibility—principles that align with the spirit of *Bayanihan*. This section explores the theological foundations of bayanihan by drawing from biblical narratives and Church teachings, demonstrating how this indigenous Filipino value reflects the essence of Christian discipleship and ecclesial life.

1. *Bayanihan* in the Old Testament: A Covenant of Communal Responsibility

The Old Testament is replete with examples of communal solidarity that reflect the spirit of *Bayanihan*. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel was an individual call to holiness and a collective commitment to uphold justice, mercy, and mutual care. First, the liberation of Israel from Egypt, articulated in Exodus 14, was a communal endeavor where God led the people as one body, requiring cooperation, trust, and mutual reliance. Second, the manna in the desert (see Exod 16) further underscores the principle of equitable sharing, ensuring that no one has too much or too little—similar to how *Bayanihan* ensures that the burdens of life are carried together. The celebration of the Jubilee Year (see Lev 25:8-55) mandated the restoration of land, freeing slaves, and economic redistribution. This reflects the

core *Bayanihan* value of ensuring no one is left behind and that the community works together to restore justice and equity. Lastly, in Nehemiah 2:17-18, Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt through collective effort, with each family and group taking responsibility for a section of the wall. This mirrors the *Bayanihan* practice of shared labor for the common good.

2. *Bayanihan* in the New Testament: The Call to *Koinonia*

The New Testament expands on the theme of communal life through the concept of *koinonia* (Greek, *κοινωνία*), which signifies fellowship, participation, and shared responsibility in the life of faith. The early Christian community exemplifies the Filipino concept of *Bayanihan*. One example is the solidarity evident in their community life, where preferential option for the poor highlights their unity: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (see Acts 2:44-45). This radical sharing of goods and concern for the well-being of all members mirrors *bayanihan*, where the community works together to support one another. In Pauline writings, St. Paul exhorts the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). This aligns with the *bayanihan* principle that no one carries their struggles alone; rather, the community steps in to support and uplift each other. Lastly, Christ as the ultimate model of self-giving. Jesus himself embodies the *bayanihan* spirit through his self-sacrificial love: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). His life and ministry were dedicated to serving others, particularly the marginalized, echoing the communal spirit of *bayanihan*, where people set aside self-interest for the good of the whole community.

3. *Bayanihan* in Sacred Tradition and Church Teaching

The Catholic Church has long emphasized the importance of communal solidarity, as seen in its social teachings. St. Paul describes the Church as a body with many parts, each essential to the whole: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:26). St. Paul emphasizes this profound unity in Eph 4:4-13 and 1 Cor 12:12, portraying the Church as an organic whole, where each member has a distinct yet indispensable role. Just as the human body is held together by ligaments and nourished through a life-giving source, the Church is sustained by Christ, who grants spiritual gifts to each member for the edification of the whole (Col 2:19). This unity is not only moral but supernatural, as Christ Himself communicates divine life to the faithful, particularly through the sacraments (Jn 15:5-8). The Eucharist serves as both a symbol and an instrument of this communion, binding the members into one body as they partake in the one bread (1 Cor 10:17). In this way, the Church, as the *pleroma* (fullness) of Christ (Eph 1:23), continues His presence in the world, growing both outwardly in mission and inwardly in holiness. This reflects *bayanihan*, where individuals recognize their interdependence and work together for the well-being of the entire community.

Pope John Paul II, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, speaks of solidarity as a firm commitment to the common good, stating that it is not a “feeling of vague compassion” but rather a “determination to commit oneself to the good of all and of each individual” (p. 38).²⁰ This encapsulates *bayanihan* as a proactive engagement in communal upliftment. Pope Francis’ vision of a

²⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (“On Social Concern”) 30 December 1987. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

synodal Church emphasizes participation, communion, and mission—which are also the key aspects of *Bayanihan*.²¹ He calls for a Church that listens and walks together, much like how *bayanihan* fosters collaboration and shared decision-making within communities.

In synthesis, we have seen that *bayanihan* is not merely a cultural trait but a deeply theological reality that resonates with the biblical vision of community and the Church’s call to solidarity. From the covenantal responsibility of Israel to the communal life of the early Christians, and through the Church’s ongoing commitment to the common good, *bayanihan* embodies the Gospel values of love, service, and unity. Recognizing this alignment strengthens the call for an inculturated theology—one that affirms Filipino cultural wisdom as a valid and meaningful expression of Christian faith.

BAYANIHAN IN THE CONTEMPORARY HUMAN EXPERIENCES

1. *Bayanihan* as a Filipino Value

Bayanihan (solidarity), a deeply rooted Filipino tradition, embodies the spirit of communal solidarity and cooperation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *bayanihan* as a “traditional system of mutual assistance in which the members of a community work together to accomplish a difficult task. In later use also: a spirit of civic unity and cooperation among Filipinos.”²² The

²¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session (October 2023), https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf.

²² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “*bayanihan* (n.),” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1009671351>.

term *bayanihan* carries two possible etymological meanings. One interpretation connects it to *bayani*, meaning “hero,” emphasizing the selfless and communal spirit of helping others. The second interpretation derives from the fusion of *bayan* (community or people) and *anihan* (harvest), highlighting its roots in cooperative labor, where members of a community come together to assist one another, especially in times of need.²³ Both meanings underscore *bayanihan* as an expression of collective generosity and shared responsibility, deeply embedded in Filipino culture.

Several core values are inherent in *bayanihan*, emphasizing its deeply communal and ethical dimensions. These include *pagkakaisa ng layunin* (unity of purpose), which fosters collective vision and shared goals; *pagkakaisa ng kilos* (solidarity in action), reflecting a spirit of mutual cooperation and brotherhood; and *pagpapaunlad ng bawat isa* (holistic development of individuals), which underscores the commitment to uplifting all members of the community. Additionally, *masigasig na paggawa* (diligence and wholehearted effort) highlights the dedication to labor for the common good. *Kinikilala ang malakas at pinalalakas ang mahihina* (recognizing the strong and empowering the weak) speaks to the value of inclusivity and support for the vulnerable, while *pag-ibig at katapatan* (love and loyalty) reinforces the moral and relational foundation of *bayanihan*. Collectively, these values demonstrate how *bayanihan* serves as both a cultural and ethical framework for communal living and social responsibility.²⁴ It is closely associated with *tulungan* or *damayan*, emphasizing mutual help and solidarity, as well as *pagkakaisa*, which conveys unity.²⁵

²³ *Historical Dictionary of the Philippines*, 2012, 3rd ed., s.v. “Bayanihan,” 69.

²⁴ Tomas Q. Andres and Pilar Corazon B. Ilada-Andres, *Making Filipino Values Work for You* (Manila: Saint Paul Publication, 1986), 116.

²⁵ Gertrudes R. Ang, “The Bayanihan Spirit: Dead or Alive?” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 7, no. 1/2 (1979): 91–93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29791626>.

Traditionally, *bayanihan* has served as the backbone of family and village life, fostering a spirit of brotherhood and selflessness.²⁶ Indeed, *bayanihan* is practical in nature, enabling communities to address both individual and collective needs, particularly in resource-limited settings.²⁷

Bayanihan is deeply connected to fundamental Filipino values that reinforce its communal and altruistic nature. These include *malasakit* (compassion), which reflects a sincere concern for others; *pagdadamayán* (mutual aid), emphasizing shared responsibility in times of need; *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (relational humanity), which fosters a sense of solidarity and interconnectedness; and *kusang-palo* (volunteerism), highlighting the willingness to serve without expectation of reward. These values collectively enrich the essence of *bayanihan*, making it more than just a practice of cooperation but a profound expression of Filipino social ethics. Within the framework of synodality, *bayanihan* offers a compelling model for fostering ecclesial communion and dialogue in the Filipino Church. Synodality, derived from the Greek word “*synodos*” meaning “journeying together,” emphasizes the participation of all members of the Church in its mission and governance.²⁸ Similarly, the International Theological Commission defines synodality as the Church’s distinctive way of life and action (*modus vivendi et operandi*), expressing its essence as a communion. It manifests when the entire People of God journey together, convene in assembly, and actively participate in the Church’s

²⁶ Lorna P. Victoria, “Community-Based Disaster Management in the Philippines: Making a Difference in People’s Lives,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 51 (2003): 65–80.

²⁷ Donald J. Bowen, “Bayanihan” in *Beginning Tagalog: A Course for Speakers of English*, 1st ed., (US: University of California Press, 1965), 83.

²⁸ International Theological Commission (hereafter cited as ITC), “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” March 2, 2018), 3, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

mission of evangelization.²⁹ Just as *bayanihan* involves the active involvement of every member of the community, synodality calls for the active participation of all baptized believers in the life and mission of the Church. The *bayanihan* spirit shows Filipinos' concept of helping one another most especially in times of need without expecting anything in return.

2. *Bayanihan* in the *Salubong* and *Salya* Documents

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) sent two documents to the Synod General Secretariat (SGS) in Rome which were the products of the Philippine diocesan, metropolitan, and national consultations as their contribution to craft the *instrumentum laboris* (working paper) reflected on by the Synod delegates for the first session in October last 2023 and the second session last October 2024. The first is the “*Salubong*” report that was published on August 15, 2022.³⁰ The second, the latest one, is the “*Salya*” report which was made public last July 12, 2024.³¹ Both reports articulate how participants in the consultations engaged in the synodal process and reception based on their personal experiences. The *Salubong* document mentions the cultural value of *bayanihan* as a rich foundation for this synodal vision. Traditionally depicted as community members physically relocating a *bahay kubo* (nipa hut), *bayanihan* exemplifies communal spirit and shared responsibility. The *Salubong* documents states that

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, “*Salubong* : The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report,” August 15, 2022, <https://synodphilippines.com/salubong-the-philippine-catholic-church-synodal-report/>.

³¹ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, “*Salya*: The Philippine National Report on Synodality 2024,” July 12, 2024, <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SALYA-The-Philippine-National-Report-on-Synodality-2024.pdf>.

the synodal journey has brought out the innate synodality in the Filipino culture. Indigenous symbols and images help explore the depth of communion, participation, and mission in Filipino culture. With Filipino traditions and values being awakened by the synodal process, several dioceses propose that it be strengthened through the exploration of cultural values and their integration in the practice of the faith. For example, how can practices such as *bayanihan* (solidarity) and hospitality promote prayer and sacramental life? How can the Filipino value of *malasakit* (compassion) find concrete expressions in our ministry to the marginalized?³²

In Filipino culture, the social value of *bayanihan* (solidarity) is often depicted by a community coming together to physically lift and move a *bahay kubo*, a traditional Filipino home, from one place to another. *Bayanihan* is an embodiment of the traditional Filipino value called *pagdadamayan* or empathy and concern for others. Such Filipino value is deeply consonant with the Catholic vision and helps build a community.³³ This act of walking together and carrying the house to transfer it from one location to another, can help capture the vision of synodality. We are walking together to renew our way of being church—from an exclusive to an inclusive church, from a hierarchical to a participatory church, from a maintenance mode towards a missionary mode. This movement is also captured in contemporary meaning of *bayanihan*.

The *Salya* document mentions use of *bayanihan* to focus on the marginalized. As synodality challenges the Church's

³² CBCP, "Salubong," 9.

³³ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Catechism for Filipino Catholics (CFC)*. (Manila: ECCCE/Word and Life, 1997); Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana., 1994).

understanding of preferential options for the poor, parishes and dioceses gave birth to new initiatives and programs of reaching out to the poor indicating a listening to the real needs and connection to realities on the ground.

Transformed by “reading the signs of the time,” dioceses have renewed their understanding of living with and for the poor through an inclusive mindset and through living out the cultural values of *kapwa* (neighbor) and *Bayanihan* (solidarity). Creative initiatives for the economically poor (Kindness Stations, Unboxing Happiness, Housing for the Poor) as well as those who are mentally and physically challenged (Radio Catechism, Catechism for the Deaf and Mute) are being implemented successfully through the collaboration of different entities. Through a determined step to listen and walk with them, the church is also led to face multi-faceted poverty from which their cries are rooted; “poverty of morals, poverty of communion, and poverty of spirituality towards mission” that needs renewal and transformation of all from within.³⁴

This act of collective effort exemplifies the interconnectedness of Filipino communities and the willingness to support one another even in the context of immigrant workers.³⁵ It was noted that “*bayanihan* can be an image of the real essence of the universality of the Church where everyone is welcome to pitch in, regardless of economic standing, culture, race, religion, nationality,

³⁴ CBCP, “*Salya*,” 5.

³⁵ Filipinos make up one of the largest immigrant groups in Canada and the majority continue to retain their Roman Catholic faith long after migrating. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research in Canada and the Philippines from 1880 to 2017, *Bayanihan and Belonging* aims to understand the role of religion within present-day Filipino Canadian communities. See Alison R. Marshall, *Bayanihan and Belonging: Filipinos and Religion in Canada* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

and gender.”³⁶ Synodality extends beyond hierarchical structures, seeking a Church that listens to the laity’s insights and allows all members to participate. The topic of the present Synod, which has changed from an event to a process, is therefore not one specific aspect (pastoral, doctrinal, or disciplinary priority) but rather the very nature of the life and mission of the Catholic Church.³⁷ Thus, in the constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the council has shown what lessons and what tasks the Church has drawn from its first experiences of doing theology in the Greco-Roman world.³⁸

In the context of synodality, *bayanihan* reflects the Church’s call for a journeying together—where the faithful actively participate, listen, and collaborate in responding to the needs of the community. Just as the success of *bayanihan* depends on the willingness of individuals to work together for a common goal, synodality thrives when clergy, laity, and religious engage in meaningful dialogue and shared decision-making. This spirit of co-responsibility ensures that the Church remains a dynamic, inclusive, and participatory community, faithfully walking together in mission and service. Such a model can offer a more grounded and effective pathway for authentic dialogue and discernment in a

³⁶ Rowan Lopez Rebutillo, “Sambayanihan: From Economic Migration to Soft-Power Evangelization Towards a Tran-Disciplinary and Trans-Colonial Inquiry into the Impact of Filipino Catholic Communities in Diaspora,” PhD. Dissertation, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, (Belgium: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2018), 259.

³⁷ Two basic texts published by the General Secretariat of the Synod, *Preparatory Document* and *Vademecum*, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html> and <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>, accessed 10 January 2023.

³⁸ Austin Flannery, ed. “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 7 December 1965,” In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*, no. 44 (Northport, New York: Costello, 1999).

synodal Church, while contributing a unique perspective to the global discourse on synodality.³⁹

3. The Case of Ana Patricia Non's Community Pantry

One of the most compelling contemporary examples of *bayanihan* was the community pantry movement that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 14, 2021, Ana Patricia Non, a 26-year-old Filipina, set up a bamboo makeshift pantry along Maginhawa Street in Quezon City. Stocking it initially with only PHP 800 worth of groceries, she placed a sign that read: “*Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha batay sa pangangailangan*” (*Give what you can, take what you need*). This simple yet powerful act of generosity quickly gained traction, inspiring similar initiatives across the country. What made Non's initiative particularly significant was the speed at which it spread, demonstrating the collective will of Filipinos to support one another. Donations poured in, and volunteers mobilized to sustain the pantries in different communities. This movement highlighted the Filipino people's innate inclination toward mutual assistance and compassion, reinforcing *bayanihan* as a living tradition rather than a relic of the past.⁴⁰

The story of Ana Patricia Non and the community pantry movement underscores the transformative power of *Bayanihan* in contemporary society. It reveals how generosity, no matter how small, has a ripple effect, inspiring collective action and shared

³⁹ Francis, “Speech Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁴⁰ Joseph Pedrajas, “Who is Patricia Non, the woman who sparked kindness through the Maginhawa community pantry?” *Manila Bulletin*, May 6, 2021, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/05/06/who-is-patricia-non-the-woman-who-sparked-kindness-through-the-maginhawa-community-pantry/>.

responsibility. The movement highlights the significance of collaboration, where individuals, regardless of social status, contribute to the common good, reinforcing the idea that every effort counts. Trust emerges as a crucial foundation for community-building, fostering a culture of honesty and solidarity. Moreover, the initiative demonstrates the role of creativity and resilience in addressing societal challenges, encouraging resourcefulness and adaptability in times of crisis. Non's leadership exemplifies how ordinary individuals can spark extraordinary change, proving that leadership is rooted in action rather than position. Lastly, the widespread impact of the movement, amplified by social media, emphasizes the power of communication in mobilizing support. Ultimately, the community pantry movement embodies the essence of *bayanihan*—a shared commitment to uplifting one another through faith in human dignity and communal responsibility.⁴¹

Despite its noble intentions, the community pantry movement faced unexpected political challenges. Government authorities, particularly the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), accused the movement of having ties to communist groups.⁴² This red-tagging—branding activists and social initiatives as linked to communism—posed a threat to the safety of organizers and discouraged some communities from participating. Nevertheless, the resilience of Non and other volunteers underscored the undying spirit of *bayanihan*, which refuses to be stifled by political adversity.

In light of contemporary challenges, *bayanihan* remains a potent model for addressing socio-economic disparities and

⁴¹ Jef Menguin, “Bayanihan in Action: What We Can Learn from Community Pantries,” *Team Bayanihan* (2025), <https://teambayanihan.com/ommunity-pantries/>

⁴² Josiah Antonio, “Community pantry initiator fears for life after false red-tag claims,” *ABS-CBN News* April 20, 2021, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/04/20/21/community-pantry-initiator-fears-for-life-after-false-red-tag-claims>

fostering a culture of social responsibility. The community pantry movement demonstrated that small, local efforts can create a ripple effect of kindness and solidarity.

BAYANIHAN: A LIVED EXPRESSION OF COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION

Bayanihan embodies the spirit of communion, participation, and mission. As a model of synodality, it fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility among all members of the Church, promoting unity in diversity and a sense of shared mission. *Bayanihan* offers a compelling model for the inculturation of the Gospel message within Filipino culture.

First, *bayanihan* is a cooperative act involving all members of the community, transcending individual roles. Traditionally, the practice involves neighbors contributing their time, labor, and resources to accomplish communal goals. As a model of synodality, *bayanihan* can inspire participatory decision-making, where every member of the Church, regardless of status, is invited to contribute to communal goals. In synodal terms, this includes listening to the marginalized, valuing the laity's voices, and bridging the gap between the Church hierarchy and ordinary believers.

Second, *bayanihan* is at the heart of the Filipino value of *pakikipagkapwa* (recognizing others as equals) and *loob* (the most authentic relational self of a Filipino). These values reflect the Church's call to communion—a call to see the Church as a family bound by shared love and mission. This sense of community as family, deeply resonant in Filipino culture, provides a fitting model for ecclesial communion in the Philippines, fostering unity in diversity.

Third, synodality envisions a Church that is mission-oriented, reaching beyond itself to serve society. *Bayanihan*

embodies this missional spirit, as it extends beyond mere community service to include active solidarity with the vulnerable. *Bayanihan* can be a model of mission where Church can reorient itself as a “Church for the poor,” committed to promoting social justice, aiding marginalized communities, and engaging in dialogue with the broader society. Through this collaboration, we aim to build together, as sisters and brothers all, in a spirit of “mutual activity and aid” (see GS 40), justice, solidarity, peace and dialogue.⁴³

In *bayanihan*, every member of the community is actively involved in the collective action, contributing their skills and resources for the common good. Similarly, in synodality, all baptized believers are called to participate in the discernment and decision-making processes of the Church. *Bayanihan* emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation, ensuring that the voices of all members are heard and valued.

Faith-based communities in the Philippines have been practicing synodality in the spirit of *bayanihan* such as the Ilocano’s *Simbaan Sangkakarubaan* (SiSa); Silsilah Dialogue Movement’s model of dialogue as a path to peace, and the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), also called Basic Christian Communities (BCCs). Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), also called Basic Christian Communities, Small Christian Communities and Small Human Communities (*Maliliit na Sambayanang Kristiyano*) are considered as a new way of being Church: The Church at the grassroots. The CBCP calls on the laity to participate in the task of evangelization and look upon BECs as a means of evangelization.

Synodality, in Pope Francis’ vision, is not merely a hierarchical structure but a process of listening, discerning, and walking together in faith. This emphasis on dialogue and

⁴³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “Final Document,” no. 123.

collaboration resonates deeply with the spirit of *bayanihan*, where every voice is valued, and every contribution is significant. For Agnes Brazal, “the risk of creating an impasse in the synodal process due to polarizing disagreements is high.”⁴⁴ In light of Pope Francis’ call for a synodal Church, theologians play a crucial role in engaging with the synodal process. While *bayanihan* provides a compelling model for Filipino synodality, certain challenges arise.

First, traditional *bayanihan*, often rooted in male-dominated community roles, may struggle with inclusivity across genders and ages. *Bayanihan*, like many traditional practices, can be influenced by gender dynamics that may not be conducive to full participation and equality within synodal processes. In some instances, women may be marginalized or excluded from decision-making roles, reflecting broader societal inequalities that need to be addressed within the Church. Interestingly, the *Salubong* document states that the “Church authorities should be more open to constructive criticism and must learn to do appreciative inquiry.”⁴⁵ Parish organizational meetings, pastoral assemblies, diocesan, vicarial, and parish levels, and BEC prayer gatherings and regular meetings should be seen as inclusive and welcoming structures that allow for active synodality. Second, the tendency for initial enthusiasm to wane, known as *ningas kugon* (initial zeal that quickly fades) may impact sustained commitment in synodal practices. A common problem arises when, “with the familiar *bayanihan spirit*, some socially oriented project is begun. Too often it fails because of the *ningas-kugon* defect of not following

⁴⁴ Agnes M. Brazal, “Synodality and the New Media,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (March 2023): 95-109.

⁴⁵ CBCP, *Salubong*, 8.

through when the initial enthusiasm wanes.”⁴⁶ Contrarily, the Final Document reiterates that “Synodality is not an end in itself.”⁴⁷

Bayanihan emphasizes the participation of all members of the community, including those traditionally marginalized or excluded. In the context of Filipino theology, this underscores the need to amplify the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups, such as indigenous peoples, women, and the economically disadvantaged. Contextual theology should strive to address the social injustices and inequalities that inhibit full participation in the life of the Church and society, guided by the principles of *bayanihan*. Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the value of *bayanihan* as a cultural treasure or its potential contribution to synodality within the Church. Instead, it highlights the need for a nuanced approach that integrates cultural insights with theological principles to foster genuine ecclesial communion and participation.

SYNTHESIS

The concept of *bayanihan* finds deep theological resonance in Paul’s teaching on the Body of Christ. Just as Paul describes the Church as a living body with many parts, each contributing to the whole (1 Cor 12:12-27), *bayanihan* reflects a communal spirit where individuals unite their efforts for the common good. In *bayanihan*, each person—regardless of status or ability—has a role to play, mirroring how the Church thrives when all members participate according to their gifts (Rom 12:4-8). Moreover, just as Christ’s physical body was broken and given for others (1 Cor 11:24), *bayanihan* embodies self-giving love, where individuals

⁴⁶ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, (Manila: ECCCE Publications, 1997), no. 369.

⁴⁷ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “Final Document,” no. 32.

make sacrifices for the well-being of the community. Through mutual support and solidarity, *bayanihan* expresses the Eucharistic dimension of Christian life—where partaking in Christ’s body calls believers to embody his love in tangible acts of service. In this way, *bayanihan* becomes an incarnational expression of synodality, emphasizing participation, communion, and mission in building the Church as the Body of Christ. Synodality transforms the church from an individual pursuit into a shared pilgrimage, where laypersons, clergy, and religious discern the Spirit’s movement together. A theology of *bayanihan* calls for a radical shift: from the pyramid model (hierarchical model of the church) to a synodal model (walking together) where all members of the church can take part in building up the kingdom of God here on earth. The voices of women, LGBTQIA+, migrants, indigenous peoples, single mothers, PWD, the marginalized communities like migrants, refugees, street children, victims of human trafficking are all welcome in this synodal journey.⁴⁸

From the Church’s spirituality and mission, the key values of *bayanihan* seems to find connection to the early Christian community's practice described in the Acts of the Apostles: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). This spirit of self-giving and mutual care is both an antidote to individualism and a call to radical inclusivity in the life of the Church. The Philippine Catholic Church can reimagine *bayanihan* through a theological lens by integrating it with concepts of *koinonia* (fellowship) and the Church as the People of God. In the New Testament, *koinonia* represents communion and mutual support (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:16), a parallel to the communal ethos found in *bayanihan*. In a

⁴⁸ Estela Padilla and Jessica Joy Candelario, “Synodality and Local Church Theologizing: Exploring Experiences and Pathways” *Hapag* 21, no.1 (2024): 14.

Church that often grapples with hierarchical challenges, bayanihan presents a model where every believer is seen as an equal contributor, embodying servant leadership and inclusivity. This model aligns with Pope Francis' emphasis on a "listening Church," one that values the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) present in all its members.

The Church's hierarchical structure, while essential, must not contradict the spirit of synodality. Hierarchy, properly understood, is a diversity of ministries in service to the Body of Christ. As Ignatius of Antioch emphasized, bishops, presbyters, and deacons are indispensable for Church life, yet their leadership must be modeled on Christ's humility and openness. The Final document no. 18 states that "In the holy People of God, which is the Church, the communion of the faithful (*communio Fidelium*) is at the same time the communion of the Churches (*communio Ecclesiarum*), which is manifested in the communion of Bishops (*communio Episcoporum*) by reason of the very ancient principle that "the Church is in the Bishop and the Bishop is in the Church" (St. Cyprian, Epistle 66, 8)."⁴⁹

A *bayanihan*-inspired approach to hierarchy envisions a less vertical and bureaucratic structure. Decisions are made in dialogue with the faithful, and authority is exercised as a service to the community. Pope Francis' call for a more synodal Church challenges entrenched clericalism and reminds laypersons of their responsibility to participate actively in the Church's communion. Hence, the Final Document notes that "in the context of the ecclesiology of the Council, with reference to the People of God, the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, "Final Document," no. 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 31.

Community pantries in the Philippines serve as a contemporary parable of *bayanihan*. They reflect the profound theological truth that the Church is most authentic when it manifests God’s love in concrete acts of service. Without formal decrees or institutional backing, these pantries exemplified how ordinary people can embody the Gospel by caring for the hungry and marginalized. This phenomenon aligns with Pope Francis’ vision of a Church that is a “field hospital,” tending to the wounds of humanity. It challenges both laity and clergy to embrace a theology that is rooted in action, informed by the teachings of Christ, and responsive to the needs of the world.

The model used by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippine Church as “Church of the Poor” will find more concrete expressions through *bayanihan* model of synodality. The majority of the dioceses mentioned in the CBCP document *Salubong* states that among their top priorities is to revitalize and strengthen the BECs.⁵¹ This “new way of being Church” or BEC is the proper space on which we can cultivate a culture of synodality and through which one can reach out to sectors, especially those marginalized and neglected.

CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church’s call to synodality aligns with the *bayanihan* spirit of Filipinos. It signals a walking together in faith, listening to one another, and discerning the path forward as a community. However, for synodality to take root meaningfully in the Philippine Church, it must resonate with the lived experiences of Filipino Catholics. This is why research on local models, such as *bayanihan*, is essential—not only to ground synodality in a culturally relevant framework but also to ensure that it remains

⁵¹ CBCP, *Salubong*, 9.

more than just an abstract concept, becoming instead a deeply embodied practice of faith and communion. Pope Francis emphasizes that “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁵²

As the Final Document reiterates that “Synodality is not an end in itself.”⁵³ It requires a transformation of hearts and structures, guided by the Spirit and informed by the lived realities of the faithful. The theology of *bayanihan* offers a uniquely Filipino contribution to synodality, reminding us that the Church is most alive when it embodies the spirit of mutual aid, humility, and shared responsibility. *Bayanihan* offers a powerful and culturally resonant model for synodality within the Philippine Catholic Church. As the Filipino Church continues its synodal journey, *bayanihan* serves not just as a symbolic model but as a practical approach that strengthens the Church’s mission of communion, participation, and outreach, grounded in a spirit of solidarity and love. To move the *bahay kubo*, a community must come together, aggregate its strengths, and move in the same direction. So as to move the Church, the people of God must walk together. This is what the CBCP documents *Salubong* and *Salya* envision for a synodal Philippine Church.

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⁵² Pope Francis “Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁵³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session, “Final Document,” no. 32.