

“A DYING TO WHAT IS SINFUL” (PCP II, 143): SYNODALITY AND ITS CHALLENGES TO THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY/CLERGY

ALOYSIUS LOPEZ CARTAGENAS

The Roman Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Francis, has recently embarked on a journey of synodality along the pathway of communion, participation, and mission. This paper examines in the light of the synodal path the conduct of Philippine bishops and priests, particularly “where (their) leadership in the Church must go, how it must be exercised” (PCP II, 30). A critical reading of data and narratives drawn from contemporary studies, church consultations, and anecdotal evidence suggests a host of vulnerabilities and deficits as well as abuses and illusions. While our reading poses a serious challenge to the vision and reality of a Synodal Church, it may also count as a summons by the Spirit for bishops and priests to “a dying to what is sinful” (PCP II, 143).

Keywords: synodality, communion, participation, mission, laity, ordained minister

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Catholic Church is no stranger to synodality. During its second Plenary Council in 1991, our local church envisioned a Church that journeys along the synodal pathway of “communion, participation, and mission” (PCP II, 137).¹ In most recent times, as if taking its cue from such a vision, Pope Francis invites local churches all over the world to take the same route. Synodality, he emphasizes, is the path “which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” as it “describes the shape of the

¹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 20 January – 17 February 1991* (Manila: Paulines Publishing House, 1992); henceforth, PCP II.

Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus."² The commitment to build a synodal church is significant for church leaders. Being "a constitutive element of the Church," synodality "offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself."³ Now, therefore, is the most propitious time for synodality to shed its light on the conduct of our ordained ministers, particularly "where (their) leadership in the Church must go, how it must be exercised" (PCP II, 30).

It must be said at the outset that there is a dearth of scientific research studies on the life and conduct of Philippine bishops and priests on par with those already done in other contexts.⁴ Nevertheless, this paper draws on data and narratives on the challenges and issues facing the Roman Catholic Church in the country that directly or indirectly impinge on the conduct of their ministry. Some are derived from surveys of social research centers, sociological studies of academic institutions, and reflections of theologians. Others are derived from church-sponsored consultations and evaluations at national, diocesan, and parish levels as well as personal experiences of bishops, priests, and the laity themselves. Although the latter set of evidence may count as anecdotal and hence not conclusive, they may serve as an invitation to more rigorous study of the conduct of ordained ministers vis-a-vis the synodal vision of communion, participation, and mission.

COMMUNION

In its Dogmatic Constitution, the Church understands itself as a "messianic people...established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth" (LG 9). It is a communion founded on the common priesthood of all baptized (LG 10), ordered and governed with a diversity of charisms and ministries bound to each other by a mutual need (LG 12, 32). At the service of this

² Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015): 1139.

³ Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating*, 1141.

⁴ See, for instance, "The Catholic Project," *Well-Being, Trust, and Policy: Highlights from the National Study of Catholic Priests* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2022).

communion is the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, the purpose of which is twofold: to nurture the filiation of each person in the Trinitarian communion by virtue of baptism in Christ (the vertical dimension) and to enliven our *koinonia* with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (the horizontal dimension). The priesthood of the ordained is therefore of radical importance for it is “the means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church” (CCC 1547; see LG 10.1-2).

The Destiny of Demography

Communion as vision and reality, however, hangs in the balance, if we take demographics as a test case. In 2005, forty years after Vatican II, the country had a total population of 85 million. Catholicism accounted for 69 million members and 7,335 diocesan and religious priests. By the year 2012, out of 96 million Filipinos, Catholics numbered 76 million served and led by 8,605 priests. The priest per Catholic ratio was 1:9000 in 2005 and 1:8000 in 2012. When the country reached 100 million in 2019, Catholicism stood at 89 million and the ideal ratio of 1 priest per 2 thousand Catholics remains unreachable.

The Catholic population is thus rising at a rate much faster than the increase in the number of priests could cope. To appreciate this deficit a comparison is in order. Taking the 2005 data as a baseline, India had only 17 million Catholics, but it had 19,000 priests, while Indonesia had 3,000 priests for a Catholic population of only 6 million. Priest per population ratio stood at 1:894 in India and 1:2000 in Indonesia, and these are nations which, unlike the Philippines, do not lay claim to be Catholic.

We should not therefore fail to appreciate the national Catholic perception⁵ that, given the lingering ratio gap, our ordained ministers tend to be “overloaded with work” as they try to meet the demands of their ministry while the flock continue to “perceive ‘the Church’ to be *malayo* (distant) from (them) especially

⁵ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Salubong (Welcoming Encounter): The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report* (July 2022), 3-4 in https://synodphilippines.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Philippines_National-Synodal-Report.pdf; henceforth, *Salubong*.

from those in the existential peripheries." Filipino Catholics feel "demoralized," "excluded" and "left out" due to the "inadequate responses to their needs", the "unfelt presence" of their pastors and the "lack of visible signs of (their) concern". They long for pastors who "journey with their flock and reach out to so many people". Three decades ago, our hierarchy/clergy honestly admitted they are "already woefully inadequate in numbers to give our people the service that is theirs by right" (PCP II, 30). Their honest admission holds to this very day.

The Need and Right to "Communio"

Communio is a fundamental right of every baptized as it is the right to access the grace, truth, and will of Christ in and through the Church, using the means that Christ himself has instituted and left us for the fulfilment of a truly Christian life. "From their spiritual shepherds," says Vatican II, "the laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance...the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and the sacraments" (LG 37; also, PO 4 and Canon 213, 762). Access to these spiritual goods are entitlement of the laity for the satisfaction of their hunger for the word of God and Church teaching (creed), their formation and growth in Gospel values and Christian virtues (code), their participation in sacramental and liturgical celebrations and their longing for a prayerful life (cult). Since the promotion and fulfilment of this fundamental right necessitate robust and enduring structures and institutions, the ordained ministers exercise leadership and oversight over their respective jurisdictions (governance).

The Shortfall of Ordained Ministers

Communio, in the Philippine church, therefore, hangs in the balance and it is less about the lack of pastoral zeal and dedication of its ordained ministers but more on the fact that, to use a biblical image, "the harvest is abundant, but the workers are few" (Mt 9:37/Lk 10:2). If the ministerial priesthood of bishops

and priests is irreplaceable for the service of communion, the need to address the deficit requires immediate and innovative action.

A pathway was already charted by Vatican II when it reinstated the “diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy” (LG 29). Basic norms have been laid out by subsequent documents to guide its implementation in local churches.⁶ Deacons, in continuity with ancient church practice, are to proclaim the Scriptures and instruct the people, exercise custody of and distribute the Eucharist, administer baptism, bless marriages, preside at funerals and burials, and/or carry out charitable works. Just recently the Philippine Church gladly announced the implementation of the reinstatement, but, as in all other local churches, it is burdened by the fear that the restoration of the ancient church practice may prejudice the flourishing of exclusively male and celibate clergy.

Vatican II may have institutionalized the fear as the Council insists on two provisos: married men who are of mature age can be deacons, *provided they do not marry again* if their spouses die, and young unmarried men, *provided they remain celibate* (LG 29; italics mine). The *provisos* are meant to guarantee the perpetuation of celibacy as the ideal state of life for the ordained. The provisos are uncalled for as the diaconate in the early church was conferred upon the married or single who met the necessary qualifications (1 Tim 3:8-12; Acts 6:1-6). Women who had the vocation and charism were not excluded from the diaconate, gauging from the tens of thousands who served as fully ordained during ten long centuries in both the eastern and western regions of the Christian Church.⁷

Unsustainable and a Mistrust of the Spirit

But why the persistence of the fear and the four decades of missed opportunity? The answer seems to lie in the church’s

⁶ Congregation for Catholic Education/Congregation for the Clergy, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons/Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998).

⁷ For the overwhelming evidence and list of scholarly studies, see, among others, the “Documented Appeal to Pope Francis to Request the Re-instatement of the Ordained Diaconate for Women” in <https://www.wijngaardsinstitute.com/documented-appeal-reinstatement-ordained-women-deacons/>.

theology of holy orders. The Church continues to maintain the "normative maleness of Jesus and his imputed absolute preference for male leadership during his lifetime...as a permanently binding disposition for his Church."⁸ Likewise, celibacy, while not a necessary part of the vocation to the priesthood nor a doctrine, is still mandatory for sacramental ordination. The order of bishops, priests, and deacons are therefore defined less in terms of what they do for God's people but more on how they are sexually different from them: single, not married, and male, not female.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to show that mainstream biblical and theological scholarship considers this theology "questionable if not indefensible,"⁹ it is, in the light of the right to communion, "pastorally dysfunctional" as well as "culturally repugnant."¹⁰ It is dysfunctional because the men who feel the calling to the priesthood but are refused ordination due to celibacy issues will quite possibly possess the charisms required for an enormously fruitful ministry. Among the ordained, many do not feel the prior calling to celibacy nor freely choose it in the same way religious priests do, but accept it, willingly or not, as an obligation. Some of them can sustain mandatory celibacy "through truly heroic and spiritually motivated personal sacrifice," while others "do not find it a personally life-giving commitment but an onerous burden that often robs them of energy and joy and has accounted for (their) resignation from active ordained ministry."¹¹

It is repugnant because while contemporary society is rising above ancient social and cultural prejudices, women in the Roman Catholic Church still end up being treated as innately inferior to men.¹² Women, indeed, play crucial roles in ecclesial life which

⁸ Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 239 and footnotes 30-31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 401-403, footnotes 30 and 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹² See, for instance, Tracy McEwan, Kathleen Phillips and Miriam Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women: An Analysis and Report of Key Findings* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle Australia, 2023) which was undertaken in 104 countries from March to April 2022 in response to the call for submissions to the 2023-2024 Synod of Bishops on Synodality.

often amounts to a real diaconal ministry, and not a few of them may have the vocation and charisms to the diaconate and even the priesthood. Yet, unlike their male counterparts, they are not supported and affirmed by receiving sacramental ordination to the Order of Deacons and of Presbyters.

The pastoral dysfunction and cultural repugnance are perhaps the stirrings by the Spirit. They tell us why the Philippine church sorely lacks ordained ministers to respond to the expanding needs of an increasingly growing Catholic (and non-Catholic) population. To insist that only the male and the unmarried are called to the ordained ministry is not only unsustainable but a mistrust of the Holy Spirit.

PARTICIPATION

In the Church, declares *Lumen Gentium* 32, “all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.” While there is a “diversity of graces, ministries and works” that orders and wonderfully governs the Church, “all are called to sanctify and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God.” There is therefore “no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex” as all, both sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God, “are bound to each other by a mutual need.”

Freedom is rooted in equality, participation via co-responsibility, and diversity in reciprocity. These aspirations are not only expressions of human dignity and freedom (OA 22), but more importantly, they are values befitting a human community that claims to be a “messianic people...sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth” (LG 9). But these values are difficult to come by in a community where power is hierarchical and asymmetrical. The sacramental ordination reserved to bishops and their helpers, the priests and deacons, vest them with the sacred power and authority to be pastors of the flock, teachers of doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing (LG 18-20). But, as I will explain below, the collective experience of Filipino Catholics suggests that this sacred power and authority is prone to abuse.

The Proclivity to Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church is the misuse of sacred power and spiritual authority by its ordained minister. It is a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior that involves the use of sacred texts, religious beliefs and teachings, and theological ideas by someone who in some way represents God. Because this type of abuse happens in a spiritual context "it can negatively affect people at a spiritual and existential level by harming their relationship with God or their sense of ultimate meaning and purpose."¹³ At its worst, it can create an "internal dissociation" which is the confusion between the voice of God in their own conscience and the voice of the representative of the Church who has invaded their conscience.

The proclivity to spiritual abuse is most glaring in the dominant way our bishops and priests respond to the recent dramatic changes in marital and familial unions. Overwhelming data suggests a steady increase in civil marriage and a decline in the number of Catholic marriages;¹⁴ a dramatic rise of cohabitation;¹⁵ a surge in the nullity of marriage if not de facto separation;¹⁶

¹³ Paul Fahey, "The Place Where You Stand is Holy Ground: Recognizing and Preventing Spiritual Abuse in the Catholic Church," September 2022, <https://wherepeteris.com/resources/the-place-where-you-stand-is-holy-ground/>. Also see Amy White, *Towards a Theological Definition of Spiritual Abuse: Ezekiel 34 and the Use of Pastoral Power* (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books, 2021).

¹⁴ In 2020 49.8% of all marriages were thorough civil ceremony whereas only 27.9% through the Catholic rite. See Philippine Statistics Authority, "Registered Marriages in the Philippines, 2020," PSA, January 6, 2022, www.psa.gov.ph/content/registered-marriages-philippines-2020.

¹⁵ From 6% in 1993 to 24% in 2013, says Bernice Kuang et al., "The Unexpected rise of cohabitation in the Philippines: evidence of socio-economic advantage or a second demographic transition?" *Asian Population Studies* 15, no.1 (2015): 8-27.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Abalos, "The rise of divorce, separation, and cohabitation in the Philippines," NIUSSP, July 10, 2017, <https://www.niussp.org/family-and-households/the-rise-of-divorce-separation-and-cohabitation-in-the-Philippines/>.

increasing acceptance of divorce;¹⁷ and the build-up of violence towards wives¹⁸ and incest.¹⁹

The proclivity begins with a sweeping condemnation of “a new liberal culture that dismisses religious teachings about personal, familial and social values as outmoded and irrelevant,”²⁰ the endless repetition of the doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage, and the constant threats of doom for the family and nation if Church teachings are not followed. Couples and families who conform to the ideals are then glorified, while those who do not or cannot are coerced to exclude themselves from the Eucharist or publicly vilified as living in the state of mortal sin or, worse, denied the grace of absolution in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. No wonder “families in irregular unions (dysfunctional families, broken families, and single parents),” among other sectors, “still feel alienated from and abandoned by the church,” emphasizes the National Synodal Consultation Statement.²¹

Interestingly, Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* (AL)²² takes a pathway which respects the fundamental equality and dignity of couples, particularly the conscience of those in irregular situations. Instead of simplifying a rather complex challenge, he makes a sharp

¹⁷ From 43% (2005) to 53% (2017), reports Sofia Tomacruz, “53% of Filipinos agree to legalize divorce - SWS,” *Rappler*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/197837-filipinos-agree-legalize-divorce-sws-survey/>.

¹⁸ See Philippine Statistical Authority, “One in four women have ever experienced Spousal Violence,” PSA, March 26, 2018, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/one-four-women-have-ever-experienced-spousal-violence-preliminary-results-2017-national>.

¹⁹ See Natashya Rodriguez, “Rape within the family: The Philippines’ silent incest problem,” *Rappler*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/171457-incest-rape-philippines-sexual-abuse/index.html>.

²⁰ CBCP, “The Christian Family: Good News for the Third Millennium,” *CBCP Online*, December 2, 2002, <https://cbcponline.net/the-christian-family-good-news-for-the-third-millennium/>.

²¹ See the Philippine bishops pastoral letter entitled “Opening New Doors (John 20:19-31): National Synodal Consultation Statement,” 7 July 2022, in CBCP, *Salubong*, Attachment 5, 28-29.

²² Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family*, March 19, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

nuance between "situations which...no longer correspond to (the Church's) teaching on marriage" and those "which do not yet" correspond (AL 292). For instance, an irregular union, whether through civil marriage or cohabitation, can be valued as a transition phase towards the sacrament of Matrimony, particularly when it is "characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials" (AL 78). Hence, moving forward, the challenge for those who exercise spiritual authority is to discern whatever good is in the fragile union and accompany the conscience of couples in their journey. Guided by a discerning conscience, couples can "recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal" (AL 303).

In other words, while there are always limitations in a person's ability to express and understand God's will, it does not give the ordained minister the green light to transgress, undermine, or supplant the freedom to discern and judge God's voice in one's most secret core and sanctuary.

Pope Francis also pivots away from a blanket repugnance towards marital separation, whether *de facto*, legal, or divorce. Some instances may not only be inevitable but, as a last resort, "even morally necessary," argues the Pope, "when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference" (AL 241). "Hence it can no longer be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace" (AL 301).

Marriage has an obvious fragility, says the Pope. It is constantly threatened not only by a hedonistic mentality and self-centeredness but, more decisively, by "a limited understanding of the gift of the Sacrament of Marriage, the meaning of spousal love and its essence as an authentic vocation."²³ For this reason, the

²³ Dicastery of Laity, Family, and Life, in *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), No. 3.

Pope criticizes pastoral approaches that smack of “an excessive idealization” and “superficial preparation.” Marital love, he asserts, is defended primarily “by helping it grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace” (AL 134), not by an “almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation” and a “theological ideal of marriage,” which is “far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (AL 36). Likewise, the earliest beginnings of marital love cannot thrive under the impulse of God’s grace by a superficial preparation. The formation of candidates for the ordained ministry (and religious life) rightly takes several years. But, if all baptized “have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God” (LG 32), the “very little time – only a few weeks – devoted to those preparing for marriage” is unacceptable and unjust.²⁴

The “Moral License” of a Financial Deviant

At a national conference of priests during the Year of the Clergy in 2004, the clergy highlighted their lack of transparency and accountability in the management of church financial resources, alongside their closeness with the rich and the powerful, and indecent lifestyle.²⁵ In 2022, almost two decades later, the participants of the nationwide consultation on the Synod of Synodality reported irregularities and inefficiencies in the management of temporal goods. They expressed the need for greater transparency and accountability from their ordained ministers so that the laity can be aware of the true financial profile of the parish or diocese.

While there is a dearth of scientific research or data on whether our bishops and priests commit fraud, there is journalistic

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Along with “clerical intrigues and politics” as well as “arrogance and abuse of power.” See workshop data as interpreted by the Social Research Centre of the University of Santo Tomas in *History and Grace: A Renewed Clergy, A Renewed Church, A Renewed Country* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2005), 239-247.

and anecdotal evidence to suggest that they do.²⁶ And as regards why and how, the triad of pressure, opportunity and rationalization developed by forensic sociologists is a most helpful analytical tool.²⁷

Pressure refers to the motivation that led an ordained minister to depart from typical honesty. A common trigger is material necessity. Without families of their own, bishops and priests worry about the financial expenditures relative to getting sick and old age. Many tend to misappropriate funds to address health issues that may be urgent, acute, or long-term. Others use the ill-gotten gain to provide for their own retirement needs. Lifestyle is another motivation. Not a few priests do not lead simple lives, and the pressure to steal comes, for instance, from securing a rest house maintaining an illicit relationship, or providing for his own family. When church funds are not available for the secret taking, donations are sourced from the generosity of unwitting benefactors by using the name of the parish or diocese. Others cultivate special friendships with the rich and powerful, thus inducing the pressure to envy and mimic a lifestyle not associated with a priest.

Opportunity alludes to how a priest or bishop can obtain the resources that do not belong to him and, often, successfully continue it through time. A host of factors include church law, systemic weakness, and consequences. Canon law requires the creation of a finance council in every diocese (canon 492) and parish (canon 537). But being consultative in nature, the bishops and priests continue to exercise sole control over church finances; and being volunteers and their appointees, the lay members of the council can readily defer their expertise to the wishes of their pastor who they tend to consider a person beyond reproach.

It is no wonder some bishops and priests can use church funds to open bank accounts and disburse money therefrom without the knowledge of the finance council. Any system of

²⁶ See, for instance, the investigative journalism of Aries Rufo, *Altar of Secrets: Sex, Politics, and Money in the Philippine Catholic Church* (Manila: Journal for Nation Building Foundation, 2013).

²⁷ Robert Warren and Timothy Fogarty, "Exploring Embezzlement by Catholic Priests in the United States: A Content Analysis of Cases Since 1963," *Journal of Forensic and Investigative Accounting* 15, no. 1 (January-June 2023): 81-102.

internal control and financial management that the council may have instituted can be unenforced if not circumvented by their sole discretion. Some parishes do not have such an oversight body as priests do not see the need. When for instance, one diocese started to enforce periodic internal audits in every parish some priests were up in arms while others employed the tactics of delay. A weak and untransparent financial system creates a low likelihood of detection. Where detection happens by chance, the errant bishop or priest does not suffer any proportionate consequence. Before the State, fraud is a crime with a severe punishment but, in the eyes of the Church, it is the human weakness of a man of God deserving of mercy and compassion.

Rationalization involves the culpable ordained minister's "ability to self-explain the fraudulent action" by suggesting that "what has occurred is not really theft." Not unlike other perpetrators of fraud, they "tend to call upon a set of special circumstances that enable them to retain self-respect through a course of conduct that would otherwise be condemned as inappropriate and rightly punishable by others."²⁸ To secretly divert a portion of parish funds for his health insurance or retirement plan is, for instance, a common justification in dioceses that do not have a sustainable health and retirement program for their clergy. In dioceses where the remuneration of priests is unclear if not arbitrary, those who minister to poor and far-flung parishes tend to self-compensate for their hard work to even out the disparity with the personal income of those in well-off parishes. Some bishops or priests raise funds for the diocese or parish via preaching missions abroad, keep the proceeds in 'off the books' bank accounts, and self-justify the secrecy as it is for good purpose, not for personal gain. In some cases, priests pocket parish funds to support their scholarship fund to benefit poor students who usually are relatives or children of friends in need of help.

All these and other examples are, in the eyes of the errant bishop and priest, for good purpose and they have the 'moral license' to proceed accordingly. Through this rationalization, they effectively self-justify the wrongdoing and continue to minister to a

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

flock that does not have the slightest clue of the pattern of financial deviance. Considering the triad of pressure-opportunity-rationalization, current efforts for the transparency and accountability of church leaders are not enough.

The Asymmetry in Pastoral Leadership and Governance

If "pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other in mutual need" (LG 32), the rights and duties of both are reciprocal. Because of this reciprocity, *Lumen Gentium* stipulates two fundamental rights of the faithful owed by their ordained ministers, namely: the right to "make known to them their needs and hopes" and the right "to express their opinion on matters that concern the good of the Church". Such right is to be valued "by reason of knowledge, competence or outstanding ability they may enjoy" and exercised "with the freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers/sisters in Christ" (LG 37). To ensure the legal protection and promotion of this reciprocity-in-diversity the Code of Canon Law enshrines them in canons 208 and 212, #2-3.

But, in Philippine Catholicism, the gap between vision and reality is too wide to bridge. The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report in 2022 characterize clergy-lay relationship as one of dominance and subordination within the different roles and functions at parish and diocesan levels. They speak of a leadership plagued by authoritarian patterns of social control due to the lack of structures that cultivate mutual listening, collective discernment, collaborative planning, and participatory decision-making. There is, for instance, "no proper channel or structure for the people, especially the sectors, to be listened to," and "when the poor speak out or try to voice an opinion, they are simply ignored or set aside as unimportant."²⁹ Consultations "are devoid of real conversations" and meetings "mere venues for information dissemination." The laity are heard under the guise of consultation but only as "a means for ratification and immediate execution."

²⁹ The succeeding quotes are taken from the report in CBCP, *Salubong*, 7-8.

The consultation participants “were timid or even afraid or lacking in confidence to speak up” as they were not used to such an opportunity.

No wonder, communal discernment “has been...lacking in all levels of ecclesial activities.” In fact, “in most instances, decision-making processes tend to favor the opinions and preferences of the affluent and powerful” lacking in transparency on the issues at hand and on how decisions are being made. As church authorities continue to be less open to constructive criticism and resist appreciative inquiry, the laity has no recourse for a legitimate grievance or forum for feedback. Sadly, enough, “some lay leaders...tend to monopolize lay leadership positions” as their appointment and term of office rests solely on the priest or bishop’s authority, thus making the succession of untested yet, perhaps, innovative generation of leaders more difficult if not a taboo.

These are examples of perceived abuses of discretionary authority. Having received the power of governance from the Lord, bishops (and by extension, the priests) are indeed not accountable in the exercise of this power to those subject to them. But, while power asymmetry is inherent to a hierarchical church, its canon law, as stated earlier, attempts to bridge the gap. For instance, it requires ordained ministers to provide for the meaningful participation of the faithful in decisions that affect their good and that of the whole church. Moreover, when the faithful perceive the conduct and decisions of their ordained ministers to be unjust or harmful, legal remedies are in place (e.g., Canons 1732-39). But, as canonists admit, the laity when aggrieved is at a further disadvantage as such remedies can be complex, requiring the expertise of a canonist, not to mention their lack of knowledge that legal recourse to due process exists.³⁰ Until then, those vested with sacred power can exploit the asymmetry to their advantage.

³⁰ See, for instance, John Beal, “Protecting the Rights of the Laity,” *The Jurist* 47, no. 1 (1987):129-164; and Charles Wilson, “The Rights of the Laity,” <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/rights-of-the-laity-1243>.

MISSION

"The whole Church is missionary, and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God" (AA 21). Bishops and priests "were not ordained by Christ to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church toward the world." Their noble duty is "to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind" (LG 30). Unlike the ordained, the laity's vocation to holiness and mission is secular since "they seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God" (LG 31).

Nevertheless, a thorny issue lingers, namely: whether the laity is afforded the "rightful freedom, initiative, and responsibility" to "infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they live" (PCP II 437). The question gains more urgency as both the ecclesial and social ministry of lay Filipino Catholics are in many ways advancing far ahead of any hierarchical mandate, theological foundation, or canonical justification.

(Who) The Religious Agency of the Laity

The Synod consultation report speaks of an urgent need for Church leaders to broaden their understanding of the laity's call to holiness and vocation in the temporal order. The report highlights, for instance, the "clamor for more meaningful, new and enculturated approaches in the Church's evangelization efforts." It is honest about the people's disenchantment "with rituals and methods that have lost their relevance and attractiveness" and invites the clergy to demonetize the church's administration of the sacraments.³¹

The hitherto if not dominant approach to understanding the Catholic/Christian faith is to simply adjudicate the congruence (orthodoxy) or incongruence (heterodoxy) of lay initiatives with beliefs, practices, and methods prescribed and approved by the hierarchy's sacrosanct office. Contemporary studies on Philippine Catholicism suggests otherwise. The traditional nuances of 'syncretism' or the binary of 'official' versus 'unofficial Catholicism

³¹ CBCP, *Salubong*, 6.

are no longer adequate to esteem the diversity, richness, and endurance of their witnessing in the world.³² If ordained ministers focus instead on “everyday religion” and shift their attention to “the self” of the believer as “religious actor” building up his or her “religious identity,” they can better appreciate the phenomenon that in recent years, as Filipinos navigate through the concrete challenges of their everyday lives, they are “(expressing) their Catholic faith in ways that they deem important, relevant, and authentic.”³³ A suitable example is the enduring devotion of Filipino Catholics to Jesus Nazareno, the Santo Niño, and other popular religious rituals. Syncretic or not, these enduring rituals nevertheless entail personal volition and embody “an intimate way of making the Christ story their own,”³⁴ far beyond the biblical imagination or catechetical instruction. Sadly, while several dioceses value popular religious practices “as important ways of experiencing God” priests, says the Report, “have a lack of appreciation of the deeper motivations of people who practice (them) lovingly.”³⁵ To value them “as vehicles of evangelization towards worship in spirit and truth” (PCP II 175) has remained an elusive dream.

The drive for religious authenticity among the lay is also phenomenal as more Filipino Catholics are turning to charismatic religiosity. With its emphasis on personal relationship with Jesus Christ, they feel “worthy of divine attention”³⁶ and, with its stress on the presence of the Holy Spirit in daily life, they find concrete answers to their (1) need for spiritual protection or healing from addiction, financial ruin, etc; (2) hunger to understand and preach God’s Word; (3) desire for public testimonies and joyful celebration

³² Jayeel S. Cornelio, “Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity: Reflections on the Contemporary Study of Philippine Catholicism,” *Philippine Studies* 62, nos. 3-4 (2014): 471-500.

³³ *Ibid.*, 474.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 482; also see Peter Braunlein, “We are 100% Catholics: Philippine Passion Rituals and Some Obstacles in the Study of Non-European Christianity,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 1 (2012): 384-413.

³⁵ Salubong, 5 and 6.

³⁶ Christl Kessler, “Charismatic Christians: Genuinely Religious, Genuinely Modern,” *Philippine Studies* 54, no. 4 (2006): 560-584.

of God's redeeming action in their lives; and (4) craving for a sense of personal belonging to a community.

A similar drive for religious agency is also evident among Generation Z, as the youth of today value more their (1) personal and experiential relationship with God whom they see as father and friend; (2) human relationships as the stage on which 'right living' matters more than 'right believing' and; (3) freedom and honesty to publicly criticize the perceived misguidedness of Catholic leaders, particularly in influencing government and electoral processes.³⁷ Further, as more Filipino Catholics are initiated into other religious traditions, such as Islam or Buddhism via the global diaspora, a kind of "double belonging" occurs as they deepen their spiritual or religious life through a certain attachment to Islamic injunctions or Buddhist meditation without renouncing their Catholic/Christian identity.³⁸

Far from being a self-absorbed pietism, this reinterpretation of lay Catholic identity is also expressed in diverse avenues of their religious activism to address social, political, and economic marginalization. These include the BECs "that try, in a participatory way and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to put life and faith together into an integrated whole"³⁹ and the countless lay people who empower the poor through faith-based organizations, e.g., *Gawad Kalinga*; or as members of NGOs, that advocate for more just laws and policies. The number of Filipino theologians is on a steady rise, many of them are lay and women,⁴⁰ and their reflections are grounded in interdisciplinary research and oriented towards the building up of the local church.

The religious agency among Filipino Catholics has been phenomenal, at least since PCP II, and it poses both a challenge and an opportunity for the hierarchy. It is a challenge because, aside from ceasing to be mere receivers of teachings or receptacles of

³⁷ Jayeel S. Cornelio, *Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young People Reinterpreting Religion* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016).

³⁸ Manuel Victor Sapitula, "Doing Research in the Global Village: Assessing Present Realities and Future Trajectories," *Hapag* 12:1 (2015): 19-20.

³⁹ Francisco Claver, *The Making of a Local Church* (New York: Orbis, 2008), 91.

⁴⁰ In the Catholic Society of Theologians in the Philippines (*Damdaming Katoliko sa Teolohiya*) alone, 27 of 50 members are women as of 2022.

beliefs, Filipino Catholics have been expressing themselves “in ways that do not necessarily align with institutional prescriptions of religiosity or orthodoxy,”⁴¹ and without the undue dependence or blind loyalty to their bishops and priests common in the not-too-distant past.⁴² It is an opportunity because “such liberty is a true and proper right that is not derived from any kind of ‘concession’ by authority, but flows from the Sacrament of Baptism, which calls the lay faithful to participate actively in the Church’s communion and mission” (CL 29).⁴³

(How) A Catholic Morality for a Catholic Nation?

A synodal pathway of carrying out the Church’s mission does not only respect and promote the religious agency of the laity. To consider the ‘how’ of mission is of equal importance. Very instructive on this regard is the Church’s fierce and enduring opposition to any legislation or program on reproductive health (RH). A study on the CBCP discourse on the polarizing issue finds an “incoherence...not in church teaching itself but in the manner in which this teaching is brought to bear on the situation of families in the Philippines.”⁴⁴ The bishops, for instance, recognize “poverty as a major threat” to Filipino families. However, they move away from a “population management frame” and, thus, lead the Church to “a practical rejection of any possible link between population and poverty.” It is for this reason that, despite the abundance of data on the direct link between poor families and their quality of life,⁴⁵ “no CBCP statement has invited poor families to even consider the possibility of limiting their family size using

⁴¹ Cornelio, “Popular Religion,” 481.

⁴² For the types of laity on this regard, see Aloysius Cartagenas, *Becoming a Leaven of Society: The Catholic Church and Philippine Politics in the Light of the Second Plenary Council* (Quezon City: Claretian, 2014), 80-102.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici: Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, December 30, 1988.

⁴⁴ Jose Mario Francisco, “Letting the Texts on RH Speak for Themselves: (Dis)Continuity and (Counter)Point in CBCP Statements,” *Philippine Studies* 63, no.2 (2015): 238.

⁴⁵ Ernesto Pernia, “Are families poor because they are large or are they large because they are poor?” *Population Forum* 8, no.2 (1982): 24-25.

the church-approved method of natural family planning."⁴⁶ Not only did they fail to dialogue and esteem the concrete experiences of poor Catholic couples and families, but "the positive value of scientific inquiry, its methods and fruits" to Christian morality and a mature life of faith (GS 62) got lost in their moral panic and pastoral rhetoric. The bishops, for instance, oppose contraceptives because they endanger a woman's health and are, directly or indirectly, abortifacients. Remarkably, they state the medical claims "as definitive" and thus "appear as the monolithic and unqualified judgment of the scientific community."⁴⁷ Despite their awareness that scientific findings are always open to new data and medical judgments are provisional, where benefits are adjudicated to outweigh the risks and applied to individual cases, the bishops pressed on to provide a sacred canopy to their favored medical claim.

Church leaders rightly defend "the right of parents and health care professionals under the rubric of the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom."⁴⁸ But they do not value with the same vigor the moral commitment of other stakeholders who hold contrary positions that are also based on moral considerations. In fact, they were publicly vilified by the opposing lay groups with the tacit support of some members of the hierarchy and clergy. To presume or, better yet, demand that "the rejection of contraceptives is the only conclusion all must arrive at" and impute moral error, or even bad faith, to those who hold otherwise,⁴⁹ as if moral knowledge is the sole privilege of hierarchical authority, is not a synodal pathway to mission.

The Church positively values other sources of knowledge and envisions their reciprocity with Christian morality and Christian doctrine "so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith" (GS 62). In matters of Catholic sexual morality, however, the gift of knowledge drawn from sciences and human experience is not made to bear on the moral

⁴⁶ Francisco, "Letting the Texts on RH Speak," 239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

principle behind the absolute ban on artificial contraception. Every sexual act intimately and chastely unites husband and wife and “must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” because their “inseparable connection” is “established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break” (HV 11-12).

The reality, however, is that the faith and practice of many Catholics, in obedience to their conscience, have already rejected the principle of inseparability. Many Catholic theologians, not a few of whom are bishops and priests, have in good faith thoroughly challenged if not dismantled the principle. Other believers of the one God, not excluding those from the non-Christian moral traditions, likewise hold a contrary teaching and praxis. If “evangelization also implies a journey of dialogue” (EG 238), the problem is, in engaging social issues, our church leaders persist to construe the Philippines as “Catholic nation” requiring a Catholic morality, a social imaginary that needs to be interrogated if not dismantled.⁵⁰ Instead, Catholic morality as a public discourse has to enter into dialogue and collaboration with other moral traditions and stakeholders to help build a robust public ethic necessary for the collective discernment and participatory envisioning of the nation’s common good.⁵¹

(From where) The Illusion of Catholic Influence

If mission must have a synodal dynamism, the hierarchy must not only truly esteem the religious agency of the laity (who) and be self-critical to the manner of its moral leadership in the public sphere (how). Perhaps, more importantly, our ordained ministers need to review the social location of the Church’s social engagements (from where). One’s chosen location offers a specific

⁵⁰ For an astute study on this theme, see Jose Mario Francisco, “People of God, people of the nation: Official catholic discourse on nation and nationalism,” *Philippine Studies* 62, no. 3-4 (2014): 341-375.

⁵¹ A church that “talks with society, not just to society,” argues Jayeel S. Cornelio, “Christianity in a Time of Authoritarian Nostalgia: Why We Need Public Theology Today,” in *Martial Law in the Philippines: Lessons and Legacies 1972-2022*, eds., Edilberto de Jesus and Ivyrose Baysic, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2022), 78-97.

field of vision necessary for an accurate reading of the issues at hand, shapes the range of options and choices the church can make, and determines the type of actions we ought to take. Some locations may offer a specific angle of vision better than others to effectively transform the reality in question.

Not too long ago, the Philippine church embarked on becoming a "leaven of social transformation" (PCP II, 261). The choice of 'leaven' as a metaphor for the social location of its mission in the temporal sphere was clear and distinct. It intended to disengage the church from socio-pastoral locations "which no longer effectively serve and perhaps even obstruct our evangelizing mission" PCPII, 143). But old habits are hard to break. As national events would show, our bishops and priests could not resist the temptation to embrace the electoral contests waged by the political community, capture the executive and legislative apparatus of the state, and shape it in a direction according to their moral teachings.

Most recent examples are the election of the populist autocrat Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency in 2016, not without the tacit if not vocal support of some bishops and priests; and the victory of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (BBM) in 2022 despite the public endorsement of some clerics for his presidential rival.

Studies suggest Duterte drew the support of the clergy⁵² by (1) fueling the perception that an "Imperial Manila" - a pejorative for a centralized government and urbanite snobbery - has led to the prolonged underdevelopment in Philippine provinces; (2) harping on the ideological perception that elitism and oligarchy have been holding hostage the government apparatus for their self-serving interests thereby prolonging social inequality and; (3) creating the need for a "political strongman" if not a "political savior" capable of the kind of meaningful change which has thus far frustrated the nation.

⁵² See Amado Picardal, "Why did priests and religious vote for Duterte?," *Council of the Laity of the Philippines*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.cbcpiliko.org/2020/07/20/why-did-priests-and-religious-vote-for-duterte/> and Jose Mario Francisco, "Challenges of Dutertismo for Philippine Christianity: Revisiting Populism and Religion," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 4, no.1 (March 2021):145-160.

Interestingly, Duterte’s clergy supporters saw in all this the political translation of the Church’s preferential option for the poor. But, lacking the fortitude to be self-critical, they failed to see that as Duterte framed his “strategy against social suffering” as a “war between the good ‘we’ versus the evil ‘others’”⁵³ he was setting the stage for an enmity between his critics, who are to be blamed and despised, and his supporters whose will cannot err. Worse, lured into Duterte’s messianic self-portrayal, his clergy supporters and their poor constituents only served to reinforce rather than dismantle traditional politics.

While one must appreciate the Church’s courageous denunciation of BBM’s agenda of historical distortion and denial about Martial Law and the EDSA Revolution,⁵⁴ the political endorsement of some clerics for Robredo seemed to have undermined the Catholic hierarchy’s non-partisan stance. It also cast doubt on the Church’s moral duty to offer guidelines to voters, even as it undercut the neutrality of church-based electoral watchdogs. Worse, it placed the laity in a difficult position “whether to support or oppose the partisan advocacies of their pastoral leaders.”⁵⁵ Anecdotal evidence suggests the resulting division among priests, lay people, and their communities along partisan lines, not to mention the ease of customizing liturgical activities, such as the Eucharist, to suit a political partisan end.⁵⁶

Trust in the Catholic Church remains high among public institutions. However, the “perception that (Church) influence in the realm of politics should be limited” has been steadily increasing in the recent decades. While it may be a necessity, says a survey, “this power should not be exercised over the realm of electoral

⁵³ Francisco, “Challenges of Duterteism,” 145.

⁵⁴ CBCP, “The Truth Will Set You Free,” *CBCP News*, February 25, 2022, <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/the-truth-will-set-you-free-john-832/>.

⁵⁵ Eric Marcelo Genilo, “Illusions of Influence: Clerical Partisan Engagement during the 2022 Elections,” <https://lst.edu/articles/illusions-of-influence-clerical-partisan-engagement-during-the-2022-elections/>.

⁵⁶ Take, for instance, the furors in an archdiocese in Mindanao when a Facebook page showed photos of their Archbishop, garbed in a mass vestment with an orange liturgical stole, surrounded by local politicians wearing the same political color.

politics and governance."⁵⁷ The participants in the Synodal consultation echoes the perception as they rightly express alarm about church leaders meddling in political affairs and supporting political candidates. When political leaders believe they owe their position to the Church and the bishops and priests think that secular rulers are indebted to them, the church becomes a de facto power broker and an easy prey to the predation of the unscrupulous among the powerful.

Being synodal in carrying out the church's mission requires the hierarchy and clergy the fortitude to act with prudence because, whether in electoral contest or legislative and policy advocacy, it "is not without limits" (PCP II, 358). There is, firstly, the distinction between what the Christian conscience of the Catholic laity leads them to act as citizens and what they do in the name of the Church together with their pastors (GS 76). Secondly, the liberty of bishops and priests to participate in policy debate and formulation must not be exercised to the detriment of the freedom of conscience and religious freedom even of non-Catholics (PCP II, 358). The same respect is an entitlement also to Catholics "who in all honesty do not see the truth the way the Church magisterium discerns, interprets, and teaches" (PCP II, 362; also 366-367). In this light, the persistence of electoral contest as the main location of the Church's prophetic mission in the public sphere⁵⁸ does not bode well for a church that wishes to be a leaven of social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By way of conclusion and moving forward, the following may perhaps count as summons of the Holy Spirit for our hierarchy/clergy:

⁵⁷ Gerald Nicolas et al., "Qualified Confidence: Church, State, and Public Opinion," in *Becoming a Church of the Poor: Philippine Catholicism after the Second Plenary Council*, ed. Eleanor Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute of Church and Social Issues, 2011), 94-99.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Aloysius Cartagenas, "Religion and Politics in the Philippines: The Public Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Democratization of the Filipino Polity," *Political Theology* 11, no.6 (2010): 846-872.

Journeying Together in Communion

Vatican II had the foresight to prepare a way to cope with ministering to an increasingly growing global Catholic population by mandating the reinstatement of the permanent diaconate. Unfortunately, it took almost thirty years for the Philippine hierarchy/clergy to admit that they are “already woefully inadequate in numbers to give our people the service that is theirs by right” (PCP II, 30), and another thirty more years to begin the implementation of the Vatican II mandate to help address the inadequacy. While these are steps in the right direction, they are also missed opportunities, and they speak of a dreadful injustice to the people Christ, the one and only High Priest, has ordained them to serve. To take the synodal path of communion is to arrest the grave injustice to the flourishing of the common priesthood of all baptized. For as long as the ordained ministry is imprisoned by the requirements of being male and unmarried, the injustice will only exacerbate. The ‘writings on the wall’ (Daniel 5:25-29) are clear, the Church is summoned by the Spirit to rectify its theology of holy orders by (1) recognizing and affirming that the same Spirit has been calling women to ordained ministry and leadership in the Church, and (2) appreciating the fact that being married, not unlike being celibate, can be also a gift to the hierarchical order to render a fruitful service to communion in the Church. Both changes should be considered legitimate expressions of the development of church doctrine.

Journeying Together in Participation

The synodal pathway of participation places the power and authority of the Church’s ordained leadership in the trajectory of co-responsibility and accountability. If by divine institution all are co-responsible for the good of the whole Church, the dismal lack of representation of the non-ordained in the governing bodies in the Church and their exclusion from decision-making processes need to be rectified. Power need not be asymmetrical, especially for a community of life, charity, and truth that publicly calls itself “a light to the world”. Accountability calls for mechanisms that

promote and defend the right of the laity to assess the conduct of their ordained ministers, the effectiveness of prior decisions and current programs, and to redress their grievances in the event of serious discrepancies, violations, and abuse.

To promote co-responsibility, (1) Church formation programs that impinge on moral conscience and spiritual well-being should be prepared through open and respectful dialogue and decided by those in charge based on a broad consultation process and unanimity. (2) The exercise of the spiritual and sacramental power exclusive to the ordained should pivot towards those who are wounded and struggling, harassed and helpless in their journey by institutionalizing a preferential option of accompaniment for them (Ez 34:16; Mt 9:36).

While financial deviance in the church is committed by a few bishops and priests, the whole community suffers. The triad of pressure/motivation, opportunity, and rationalization helps us understand the urgency of the following changes: (1) diocesan and finance councils should be also deliberative in power and the enforcement of any system of financial management and internal control should bind the bishop and his clergy; (2) lay experts and representatives in these councils should no longer be appointed by the bishop and priest, they rather be chosen by the community through a transparent electoral process and serve for a limited term of office; (3) bishops and priests should be subject to independent auditing of diocesan or parish finances and be required to report audited statements to their respective communities, while the laity, exercising their freedom of information, should have access to make a review if they feel necessary; (4) a financial wrongdoing of a bishop or priest should be considered a crime, similar to sexual abuse, punishable by both church and civil laws; and (5) likewise, those who have knowledge of the malfeasance, whether a bishop or priest, and did not act to prevent or report it should also be held accountable.

To address the problem of pastoral neglect and abuse, the power to legislate, execute, and judge need not rest solely on the ordained but should rather be separated and shared with the laity. Thus, (1) diocesan and parish pastoral councils must be deliberative, their decisions collegial, and their membership elected

by the community. (2) The process of consultation and communal discernment, particularly in matters that affect the good of a parish or diocese, should be institutionalized at the grassroots level, and its input a requirement for deliberation and decision-making. (3) Bishops and priests should be subject to a mechanism of periodic evaluation of the performance of their pastoral duties and the exercise of their power to govern. (4) The election of bishops should no longer be done in utmost secrecy and its consultation process be widened to achieve the broadest unanimity possible; likewise, in the selection of future priests, the laity, whether as individual or as a group, have the right to make their assessment and recommendation known to the local bishop. (5) An office and procedure for the redress of complaint or grievance needs to be established in every parish and diocese independent of the priest and bishop; where recourse to a judicial court is necessary, the aggrieved laity should have the right to assistance by a canon lawyer and to a fair trial.

Journeying Together in Mission

The phenomenal drive for religious authenticity and agency of the laity to lead a holy life and evangelize the temporal order in which they live is an unmistakable sign of the workings of the Spirit. Lay ecclesial and social ministry is not an “apostolate” but rightfully a “vocation” on a par in dignity with the ordained, albeit different from it. Theirs is not a ‘function’ but a ‘mission’. Thus, for the fruition of their charisms and the nurturance of their freedom, passion, and creativity our local church leaders should orient all its institutional resources for the development of a standardized formation program on a par with the preparation of candidates for the ordained ministry (and religious life). There is an urgent need to review the commitment made for a “preferential reliance on the poor” as agents “in the work of evangelization” (PCP II, 132) and address its gaps and failures.

As for the “how” of mission, an honest appraisal of the effectiveness of church pastoral statements/letters is acute, while engaging social issues through the social construct of the Philippines as a “Catholic nation” must be abandoned. Instead, the

path of dialogue with our modernizing society needs to be pursued while the discernment of its promise and perils calls for participatory structures and evidence-based information. Moving forward, (1) now is the time for the bishops to gather groups of experts drawn from both theological and scientific disciplines, with each group tasked to develop the church's official policy and advocacy position on a specific issue through direct engagement with the affected groups/communities, the purpose of which is to sustain a moral/ethical conversation about the issue in the public sphere and thus aid legislative processes and/or guide policy formulations. (2) A church protocol is urgently needed to set the boundaries between the "advocacy of lay leaders" and the "moral suasion of pastors" (PCP II, 358) and bind both to respect the freedom of fellow Catholics "who in all honesty do not see truth the way the Church magisterium discerns, interprets, and teaches" (PCP II, 362, 366-367) whether in public policy formulations, legislative debates, or electoral contests. (3) It is both a decree and a church law that the laity, not the clergy, has the mission of "penetrating the temporal order through the spirit of the gospel" (AA 2-3 and canon 225.2), hence, there should be zero-tolerance for ordained ministers to aspire for or hold a public elected office, the violation of which require stricter penalties.

Synodality is a summons for our Church leaders to disengage from the socio-pastoral location of church-state relations. Such location is a remnant of the anachronistic theory of the church as a perfect society, with the state as its equal counterpart, albeit in the temporal sphere. It is where the proclivities of partisan politics, a Catholic vote for a Catholic nation, and single-issue politics thrive. It is also the location that fans the flames of being a powerbroker or the nostalgia for a populist strongman. What if the Philippine church will pivot away from such a socio-pastoral location and incarnate itself in the bosom of civil society, particularly in the lives, advocacies, and projects of the marginalized? What if our local church will instead create a national pastoral roadmap, through a national synodal process, that enables dialogue and collaboration with civil society groups and helps build a robust public ethic necessary for the collective discernment and participatory envisioning of the nation's common good?

In closing, the Philippine Church may not be a stranger to synodality, but to journey together along the synodal pathway of communion, participation, and mission is a summons by the Spirit of Christ to our bishops and priests to renew the commitment they made three decades ago. “In order to be renewed as Church,” they said, “we must leave behind many ways of thinking, speaking, and acting which no longer effectively serve and perhaps even obstruct our evangelizing mission. This will mean an unsettling pain, a disengagement from what is cherished but is now obsolete or obstructive, a dying to what is sinful, that we come to newness of life” (PCP II 143).

Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas
Bettystown, Ireland
louiecartagenas@yahoo.com