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MORALITY AND SPIRITUALITY OF ASIAN LAY MISSIONARIES: AN ASIAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines the morality and spirituality of women lay missionaries from an Asian feminist perspective. With a renewed understanding of mission and evangelization, the women lay missionaries I interviewed are moral agents who participate in the mission of God actively. Asian feminist theology understands mission in a way that opens liberating spaces for global interdependence and responsibility for our common past and present. It interprets mission in relational terms, calling people to live in relationships to be fully human. Based on my interviews with the lay missionaries from Hong Kong and my observation of lay missionaries of other Asian places, I found that their understanding of mission is based on an inclusive, relational understanding of Divine power and relation. They integrate spirituality and morality through their ministries. They put their understanding of mission into practice, in solidarity with local people in the spirit of affirming relatedness. They collaborated closely with local people in dialogue and partnership.

Keywords: Feminist Theology, Laity, Missiology, Missionary, Mission Theology, Women in Ministry

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1. Introduction

The traditional view of mission is closely linked with the history of the expansion of the Christian church with the Euro-American perspective of “civilizing missions” and bringing the gospel to heathen lands. According to the Christian Scripture, the gospel is to be preached to all nations until the end of the age (Mt 28:18-20). The imperialist, patriarchal social structures of the Greco-Roman empire gave the church a mandate for mission that combined the European imperialism in the 19th century with the gospel. Thus, mission is understood in the form of messianic universalism. Now, living in a postcolonial age, we understand mission and evangelization as Christian witnesses to God’s mercy and justice everywhere. This is due to the renewed understanding of mission and evangelization of the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council and the role of laity in mission work.

As a lay woman from Hong Kong, I have been a member of the Hong Kong Catholic Lay Missionary Association for ten years. I joined some exposure trips to other Asian and African countries, visiting lay missionaries from Hong Kong working in other places and trying to understand their mission works. I also helped to organize the first Asian Lay Missionary Forum (ALMF) in Hong Kong in 2015, and had the chance to hear a variety of experiences of lay missionaries, mostly women, from Asia or serving in Asia. Now I am conducting an oral history project on women lay missionaries from Hong Kong, attempting to find out their understanding and motivation of mission as well as their experiences in mission works. I found their mission works are different from the traditional view of mission. Instead, they are very much in tune with the spirit of Vatican II which emphasizes a multi-dimensional view of mission and evangelization.

In this article, I would like to discuss the morality and spirituality of lay missionaries from an Asian feminist perspective, based on my interviews with the lay missionaries from Hong Kong and my observation of lay missionaries of other Asian places in the ALMF. I hold that the women lay missionaries I interviewed are moral agents who participate in the mission of God actively, with a renewed understanding of mission and evangelization. They also enhance the capability of others and empower them through their ministries. Their moral actions are rooted in their spirituality. In this paper, I will first delineate the understanding of mission and evangelization,

particularly the role of laity and women in the Church's documents since Vatican II. Then, employing experiences of some Asian missionaries, with focus on two women lay missionaries from Hong Kong, I will discuss the integration of spirituality and morality in their ministries and how they accomplish their mission through their services, reflecting their viewpoint of mission and evangelization. Finally, I will offer some preliminary reflections from an Asian feminist perspective.

2. Laity's Role in Mission and Evangelization

There is a renewed understanding of mission and missionary work of the Catholic Church since the 1960s. Mission is no longer seen as an expansion of the Church and the promotion of the conversion of other peoples in foreign lands. Christian triumphalism in the past led to the lack of respect and reverence for the integrity of the religious experience of others. The missionary task is not one of the many activities of the church. What makes the Church a true community of believers is her mission identity. The Church is mission. The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* states that the missionary quality is the core of the outreach of the Trinity to humankind. "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father."¹ Instead of being merely focused on converting heathens into Christianity, Christian witness, shown by "the example of their lives and by the witness of the word,"² is an utmost important element of mission work. People who observe the good works of missionaries can glorify God and can perceive more fully the real meaning of human life and the universal bond of the community of humankind. The examples from missionaries' lives are regarded as the first examples of the Christian orientation for non-believers. Missionaries are encouraged to join people in the mission field by esteem and love; to be members of the group of people among whom they live; to share in cultural and social life by various enterprises of human living; to get familiar with their national and religious traditions; and to lay the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among non-believers gladly and reverently.³

¹Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* (Of the Mission Activity of the Church), 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html

²Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 11.

³Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 11.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis also reminds us that “an evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”⁴

Through immersion in the local culture, especially with dialogue, not for the intent of preaching, but to learn and observe how and where these people are already close to God, lay people will begin to do the work of uncovering. This can be done through involvement in social and economic life, education of children and young people, teaching moral truth, public service in developing nations, working toward the uplifting of human dignity and improving the living conditions.⁵ All these works can lead to a gradual opening up of the revelation of Christ in the world. The Church has to be at the service of the mission of God to bring all men and women to a liberated and harmonized humanity.

There is a multidimensional understanding of mission that is evident in missiological thought today. In 1984, the Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians described mission as a “single complex and articulated reality,” encompassing many aspects such as: presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer, and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and proclamation and catechesis.⁶ Pope John Paul II claims that bearing witness to the faith and to the Christian life is a service to their brothers and sisters and a fitting response to God. In discussing the elements of mission, he speaks about witness, proclamation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue, working for development and doing deeds of charity.⁷ The work of justice, charity and compassion is interrelated with a genuine life of prayer and contemplation, and indeed it is this same spirituality that will be the wellspring of all the evangelizing work.⁸ These are integral dimensions of mission that constitute evangelization.

⁴Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 24.

⁵Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 12.

⁶The Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians is now called Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. See Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004, 350-51.

⁷John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 41-60. See also Stephen Bevans and Eleanor Doidge, “Theological Reflection,” in Barbara Kraemer, ed., *Reflection and Dialogue: What Mission Confronts Religious Life Today?*, Chicago: Center for the Study of Religious Life, 2000, 38-39; Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 348-395.

⁸John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), 23.

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder suggest that mission today should first and foremost be characterized as an exercise of dialogue. Just as the interior life of God is a perfect communion of gift and reception, identity and openness to the other, communion of gift and reception, communion in relationship and communion in mission, so the church that is called into being by that mission must be a community that not only gives of itself in service to the world and to the peoples of the world's cultures but learns from its involvement and expands its imagination of the depths of God's unfathomable riches.⁹

Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: all are always "missionary disciples."¹⁰ In fact, the laity play an important role in the work of the missions, through their lives, words and deeds. They teach in schools, administer temporal goods, cooperate in parish and diocesan activities, organize and promote various forms of the lay apostolate, work in universities or in scientific institutes.¹¹ In his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, when speaking of the laity, Pope John Paul II points out "faith as gift and evangelization as task... The integration of faith, proclamation, and Christian living is the theology of laity."¹² The "witness of life" is the Pope's comprehensive concept describing and prescribing the identity and the role of lay people in Asia.

3. Women's Role in Mission

All Christians, both women and men, have a role in evangelization and share the mission of the Church. Pope John Paul II says: "The Church should be a participatory Church in which no one feels excluded, and the Asian Synod Fathers declared the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in Asia to be a special pressing need."¹³ In order to strengthen the quality of service, Pope John Paul II suggested that "women should have more opportunities to learn theology and other disciplines... women should be allowed to participate more in pastoral work, diocesan and parish work, and diocesan synod."¹⁴

⁹Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 348. After discussing various kinds of mission theology in more recent decades, they give a synthesis and call it "prophetic dialogue."

¹⁰Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 120.

¹¹Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 41.

¹²Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 10.

¹³Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 45.

¹⁴Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 45; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.

The Asian Church leaders of FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences) affirm that the recognition of women's full personhood must equally be evident among the People of God, the Church. They further affirm that women should take significant responsibilities in various kinds of ministries and decision-making process of the Church.¹⁵ The FABC affirmation of the role of women in the church has some implications for a new understanding of men and women partnership in mission. If the heart of mission is the Kingdom of God where the reordering of relationships is central in our societal and ecclesial concern, then the praxis of mission is liberation. To do justice is the way to know the truth. Any message of liberation must be accompanied by an act of identification with those who are at the margins of society. To take up the cause of those who have been ignored in history is necessary in rectifying the abuses committed against their dignity.¹⁶ From a feminist perspective, the partnership of women and men becomes life-giving for others, especially for those who are at the margins. Feminist theologian Beverly Harrison points out that giving and receiving characterize authentic ministry and are active modes of being in the world. Reciprocity, mutual acknowledgment, and shared leadership are central to ministry, in line with Jesus' vision of a praxis consistent with the reign of God.¹⁷

Using the experiences of some Asian missionaries and with a focus on two women lay missionaries from Hong Kong, I will now examine the morality and spirituality of lay women missionaries, trying to illustrate their own moral agency and their role in affirming others' dignity and capacity.

4. Women Lay Missionaries in Asia

A number of lay missionary organizations have been set up in response to the call for full and active involvement of the laity in the Church's life and mission and to respond to the needs of the poor and

¹⁵Such messages can be found in the plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences such as the assemblies in 1986 and 1990. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences also set up the Bishops' Institute of Lay Apostolate (BILA) on Women, in which women are seen as co-evangelists and active agents. The attitudes are: For women, with women, and by women, in the spirit of partnership in mission. See Virginia Saldanha, ed., *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, Bangalore, India: Claretian Publications, 2007.

¹⁶Percy G. Bacani, "Women and Men – Partnership in Mission," in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, 70, 75.

¹⁷Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, 224-225.

the marginalized. Some have a longer history having been founded in the 1970s or 1980s. These organizations recruit and help people to discern their callings for serving as lay missionaries in other places in need. The lay missionaries live together with local people, sharing joys and sorrows through various ministries and activities. They strive to practice the teachings of Christ in their own lives and involvements just like Jesus did. Living among local people, they seek to live the values of the Kingdom and witness to God's unconditional love for humanity and for the world. They believe that they are called to preach the Good News especially to the poor and marginalized, help build the Church and serve the Kingdom by permeating the world with Gospel values.¹⁸ They walk and live and share with women and men in need.

In order to create a platform for lay missionaries from Asia and in Asia, about fifty lay missionaries from ten missionary groups from various Asian countries serving in Asia, gathered in Hong Kong in May 2015 together with some supporters at the first Asian Lay Missionary Forum (ALMF). Most of the participants were women lay missionaries. The theme of this Forum was "Churches in Asia: From Conversion to Evangelization." Besides listening to the experiences and wisdom of the speakers, the participants learned from each other through presenting the work and activities of their groups. Their renewed understanding of mission and commitment to their ministries was evident.

In what follows, I would like to focus on two lay missionaries from Hong Kong in Cambodia, based on interviews I conducted in 2015-2016,¹⁹ to demonstrate the integration of their morality and spirituality and how they put their understanding of evangelization and mission into practice.

4.1. Lucia: Affirming Human Values and Dignity through Education

Lucia has been a lay missionary for almost twenty years. She completed a degree in education and was a teacher in a secondary school in Hong Kong before she went to Cambodia. She knew many

¹⁸Presentations at Asian Lay Missionary Forum in Hong Kong, 22-25 May, 2015. See also websites of Hong Kong Catholic Lay Missionary Association (HKCLMA), <http://www.hkclma.org.hk/>; Japan Lay Missionary Movement (JLMM), http://jlmm.net/english/about_us/; Philippine Catholic Lay Mission (PCLM), www.philcatholiclaymission.com

¹⁹I joined an exposure trip to Cambodia organized by the Hong Kong Catholic Lay Missionaries Association in 26 December 2015 to 3 January 2016. Interviews were conducted during the trip.

Cambodian children live in poverty through the news and wanted to bring hope to them through education. Thus, she left her stable job as a school teacher in Hong Kong and moved to Cambodia to serve the poor community. Twenty years ago, when Lucia just started her ministry in mid-1990s, Cambodia was still in an unstable situation. People experienced persecution, inhumane treatment, famine, and disease. It was not until the end of 1990s that people woke up from this nightmare. To this day, however, they still suffer from poverty, inadequate basic infrastructure, hygiene problem and lack of education. As a result many non-governmental organizations set up their services in Cambodia to help rebuild the country. Among them is the Pontifical Foreign Missions Institute (PIME) which established the New Humanity Program. Providing education and rehabilitation services, the PIME fathers sought to help local people live in dignity and to affirm their value as persons. Lucia was involved in this program for a number of years when she started her ministry in Cambodia, teaching students at various levels and conducting teachers' training.

Lucia has experienced different working environments and served in various positions. Although she likes all the ministries she was assigned to do, she prefers working as a frontline teacher, especially teaching children. She believes that children learn most of the important values such as love, responsibility and respect during the early stage of learning. They are open and curious to learning. Now, Lucia mainly works as a trainer of teachers in the Jesuits' education program, travelling from village to village. She thinks that her former experience in teaching has equipped her present ministry which she believes is God's arrangement for her.

Reflecting on her experiences, Lucia compares her faith journey and her relationship with God to driving in a foggy night, when one is able to see just a few meters ahead. "All I have to do is to put my trust in God. God will lead me through the way to see clearer the road ahead. If I stopped whenever I faced uncertainty, I would not be able to see my way. I deeply believe that my missionary journey in the past years has been guided by God step by step." Lucia believes that the Holy Spirit often shows her the way and gives her guidance at suitable times. She said that she did not understand the meaning of contemplation in action before. However, with more experience in prayer and ministry, she can feel the presence of God in her daily life. "I recognize how God guides me in my work and the moments I feel closest to God is when I pray at night and reflect what happened

during daytime." Although Lucia does not preach and ask people to convert to Catholicism, she thinks that she bears witness through her life and behaviour. Her commitment to ministry, her presence among people, and the way she lives out the Christian values are part of evangelization. She feels blessed to serve as a lay missionary in all these years. She gained much more than she gave.

4.2. Margaret: Discover and Nurture Capabilities of People

Margaret, another lay missionary, is an occupational therapist serving in the rehabilitation centre of the New Humanity Program in Cambodia. She helped design services suitable to the clients who are physically or mentally disabled, and set up a system in the centre so that cases can be retrieved easily for follow-up training, as well as to provide training to local workers for continuation of the work. Margaret stressed that they do not emphasize the weaknesses of the clients. Rather, they help people with different abilities to live independently, taking care of themselves, affirming and making good use of their potentialities and capabilities. "My work was to discover and nurture abilities of our clients." Besides providing training to the clients, she visited her clients' families to provide them more information about rehabilitation, considering that cooperation from family members is critically important during the rehabilitation process.

Margaret just finished her two-year term service. During these two years, Margaret realized that as an introvert, she needed to open up more to others and to learn how to communicate with them. She said, "I was lucky to meet many nice people who were willing to help me and support me." Margaret gained friendship and trust from her local colleagues who were willing to share their experiences. One of her colleagues shared with her how her family was persecuted by the former government. In Cambodian culture, sharing suffering of the past is uncommon, especially to a foreigner. This experience touched Margaret deeply.

Margaret is grateful that she can make good use of her experience as an occupational therapist to serve the Cambodians. However, she had to make adjustments due to limited resources and also due to a different culture she was dealing. She made use of available materials to respond to the needs of the people, particularly to help her clients with physical disability to move easily. Margaret believes that everyone has limitation in daily life due to various reasons. Living in a new environment, she also felt inconvenienced and handicapped, to

a certain extent. "I believe that even with different abilities, everyone should be respected and be able to live in dignity."

Living in Cambodia, away from busy city life, Margaret had more time to be alone and be in touch with the nature. She realized the close relationship between prayer life and her service. "Contemplation looks simple but in fact it is very rich. When I pray amidst the beauty of nature, I feel the presence of God in simplicity. I feel more humble. In poverty and inadequacy, I can feel the strength and power of human life and the presence of God." Margaret returned to Hong Kong recently but she will go back to Cambodia and serve on a short-term basis.

5. Reflections from an Asian Feminist Perspective

After looking at the experiences of these women lay missionaries, I now offer a reflection from an Asian feminist perspective, focusing on their moral agency and how they understand mission and work for evangelization.

As stated at the beginning of this article, a traditional view of mission is one of expansion and domination, a one-way traffic model of sender and receiver. However, from a Christian feminist perspective, God's mission should be a gift of welcome for all. This view of mission honours those whose cultures, language, gender, race or religion is different from our own. In a world of conflict and suffering, solidarity with others who are different from us is key to participation in the sending and mending activity of God.²⁰ A sending God invites and welcomes us to be part of the work of restoring the creation that God intends to make new (Isa 43:18-21).

Postcolonial feminist theology has its strengths in highlighting the hidden colonial discourse in theological works and in the history of Christian mission. It reminds us to be aware of the way we theologize using only our lens, thinking that the world is only ours to see from a male perspective, or from a white and western view, or from a middle-class woman in privileged position, insensitive to the social locations of others, and imposing our worldview and value system on them.²¹

²⁰Letty M. Russell, "God, Gold, Glory, and Gender: A Postcolonial View," *International Review of Mission* (Jan 2004) 45.

²¹Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theologies*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000, 62; Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

Based on the above viewpoint, a feminist missiology is a missiology that is life giving for all as Christians participate in God's action of mending creation.²² It places emphasis on an inclusive, relational understanding of Divine power and relation, which allows incarnation to be a continuous story because God is deeply involved in the human condition. It is a process of engaging in a common learning process, a communal search for truth which is transformative of praxis. Such a process would require the cultivation of a listening attitude that brings experiences of others into words.²³ It understands God as a liberator and is founded on the metaphor of God's Trinitarian mission, an expression of love and welcome for all people of every nation and religion, and of all creation. In this mission God shows no partiality, and rejects all attempts to use domination to rule over others in God's name.²⁴

From a feminist perspective, the participation in God's mission rejects what is death — dealing, and affirms the creation of pathways to fuller human life.²⁵ From this same perspective, we are called to concrete and authentic solidarity with all who are in situations of suffering and oppression.²⁶ German feminist theologian Katja Heidemanns writes that what is needed today might be called a missiology of risk which is shaped by the ever-present Spirit's call to lives of empathy, love, responsibility and accountability.²⁷ Founded on the mission theology of the Holy Spirit, the missiology of risk reimagines the trajectories of the Spirit as reaching out to others across boundaries of faith and race, as well as culture and generation. This is so because it basically interprets mission in relational terms, calling people to live in relationships in order to be fully human. It understands mission in a way that opens liberating spaces for global interdependence and responsibility for our common past and present.

From my conversation with the women lay missionaries, I found that their understanding of mission is based on an inclusive,

²²Russell, "God, Gold, Glory, and Gender," 44.

²³Mary Grey, "Feminist Theology, Evangelization and the Empowerment of Truth," *The Month* 12 (1992) 490.

²⁴Russell, "God, Gold, Glory, and Gender," 45.

²⁵Katja Heidemanns, "Missiology of Risk?: Explorations in Mission Theology from a German Feminist Perspective," *International Review of Mission*, 93, 368 (Jan 2004) 108.

²⁶Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Solidarity," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Louisville: John Knox, 1996, 266f.

²⁷Heidemanns, "Missiology of Risk?" 109.

relational understanding of Divine power and relation. Their concrete ministries in Cambodia also show that they put their understanding of mission into practice, that is, in solidarity with local people in the spirit of affirming relatedness. They shared not only their knowledge but also their lives, as they collaborated closely with local people in dialogue and partnership, providing them training, so succeeding on their own, the people learn self-reliance and independence.

Feminist theology often upholds an ideal of full human moral agency and well-being which understands justice as egalitarian participation of all human beings in the common good.²⁸ It regards women and men as equal subjects, supporting their equal participation in society that contributes to the common good, as well as their equal share in those benefits comprised by it.²⁹ Thus, it is important for every woman and man to live as a moral agent.

From the experiences of these two women lay missionaries, we can see that it was an intentional choice for them to live among the poor in response to God's love. They know clearly that they are not able to change the bigger environment and that people still live in poverty. However, they know what they can do to contribute toward improving the quality of human life. With their presence among people in need, and their companionship with them, and making use of their expertise to provide education and rehabilitation service, they sought to bring hope to people, especially to children and youth. Option for the poor is not just an individual act but a way of life to them. They are moral agents themselves who work to enhance the agency and capabilities of other people through their ministries.

For these lay missionaries, spirituality and morality are closely linked together. They integrate their contemplation/spiritual lives and action/moral lives. They feel the presence of God among the people they serve or the students they teach. When they pray in silence, they contemplate on the meaning of their ministries and discern which moments brought them closest to God and which brought them distant from God. As Filipino theologian Mary John Manazan points out, spirituality is an integration of various life experiences, responding to God and discovering God's presence in daily life, in order to experience God's mystery.

²⁸Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 62.

²⁹Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminism and Christian Ethics," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, San Francisco: Harper, 1993, 212.

Spirituality is the motivation and inspiration of action and decision. It encourages one to respond to God in reality, to live out Christian values in concrete actions. It helps one balance between various factors, involving individual and others, material and spiritual, religion and politics, peace and conflict, so that one can move towards a holistic salvation.³⁰

Mananzan also suggests that an integral spirituality is an integration of religious life and social life. Spirituality is not confined in the church, in the sense that transcends the work that is specific to proclamation or preaching. A person who commits to evangelize can work as a teacher, nurse or doctor, social worker or other kinds of work.³¹ We see that the women lay missionaries carry out their mission in various settings, for different people in need, touching their lives with the love of God that heals and mends, that enables and empowers. There is no breach between spirituality and morality. The women lay missionaries live their spirituality in their moral agency, and their moral agency is deeply rooted in their spirituality.

³⁰Solidarity Philippines Australia Network, "Feminism and Spirituality Like a Breath of Fresh Air!" *KASAMA*, 12, 2, April–May–June 1998 (<http://cpcabrisbane.org/Kasama/1998/v12n2/Maryjohn.htm>).

³¹Solidarity Philippines Australia Network, "Feminism and Spirituality Like a Breath of Fresh Air!"