

ASIAN  
HORIZONS  
Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2019  
Pages: 60-74

## THE SYNOD ON THE YOUTH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENDER MINORITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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### Abstract

How inclusive is the final document of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Synod on the Youth in 2018 to young women and LGBTIQ+? Taking the cue from the Synod's emphasis on compassion and listening, this paper begins with an overview of some studies regarding some concerns the Philippine youth have with regards to virginity and queer experiences of gender and sexuality. This paper analyzes the final document in the context of these experiences in terms of aspects that may be beneficial to women and LGBTIQ+, parts that seem ambivalent, and existing challenges. Based on Gregory Baum's four levels of social sin, this presentation argues that for the positive aspects of the document to influence a collective decision in the church to authentically become a compassionate and inclusive community, improvements need to be made not only in terms of pastoral recommendations but also in terms of trends, religious symbols, and consciousness.

**Keywords:** Church, Ecclesiology, Feminist Theology, LGBTIQ+, Queer, Women, Youth

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## Introduction

### Listening with Compassion

There can be many women, but they ironically remain to be a minority voice in Church and society together with LGBTIQ+ persons. A desire to become a compassionate Church thus propels the Synod of Bishops on the Youth held in 2018 and its outcomes. The Church's evangelical compassion, rooted in Christ's compassion, is evoked by coming together and listening to each other with empathy.<sup>1</sup> Taking the cue from the Synod's emphasis on listening to the youth and journeying with them,<sup>2</sup> this paper begins with a glimpse of some of the struggles of many young people in terms of gender through three different studies on female virginity, LBT women's experiences, and gay college students' feedback on religious education.

A study on Filipinos' perception of virginity shows that women's virginity is regarded as generally very important for Filipinas. Some of the women interviewed equate their value to virginity or value it due to social pressures. One interviewee believes virginity is important, "Kasi yun lang ang maipagmamalaki mo talaga. Sa babae, yun lang ang maipagmamalaki nya. [It's the only thing you can be really proud of. For a woman, it's the only thing she can be proud of]." <sup>3</sup> Another woman narrates, "Nakaririnig po ako kapag nag-iinuman, sinasabi nila, 'Ano ba yang asawa mo, hindi mo nakuha ng virgin, ano ba yan!' Kasi kapag nag-away, yan ang maisusumbat hanggang sa pagtanda. [I hear things, like when the men are drinking, they say 'You didn't get your wife as a virgin, what the hell is that.' Because if a couple fights, it will always be brought up until they grow old]." <sup>4</sup>

Another study focuses on the experiences of lesbians, bisexuals and transgender (LBT) women. They narrate experiences of rejection even from their own families, and alienation from religion.<sup>5</sup> Kaycee admits

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<sup>1</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment" (Vatican, October 3, 2018), secs. 1, 63, accessed January 21, 2019, <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people--faith-an.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 138.

<sup>3</sup>Eric Julian Manalastas and Clarissa C. David, "Valuation of Women's Virginity in the Philippines," *Asian Women* 34 (March 31, 2018) 38.

<sup>4</sup>Manalastas and David, "Valuation of Women's Virginity in the Philippines," 138.

<sup>5</sup>International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, *Kwentong Bebot – Lived Experiences of Lesbians, Bisexual and Transgender Women in the Philippines*, New

how being Catholic prevents her father from understanding her and so she chose to leave the church: “I was born Catholic, my father reminded me... when I told him I am a woman, he said, ‘No, you’re not, you’re born male, you have to be man, you’re a boy’ ... I said I am not in between, I am a woman...That’s why I changed my religion ... [to what] I call paganism or pagan.”<sup>6</sup> Vanessa, on the other hand, has chosen to believe in God without being affected by religion: “Religion doesn’t influence me on being a transgender. Religion did not have an effect on me. I just believe in God.”<sup>7</sup>

The third study involves Filipino gay or bisexual male college students who are mostly Catholic.<sup>8</sup> They are “hidden as learners” who are often assumed by the educational system to “not exist.”<sup>9</sup> However, they have much to say about sex education in school. Interviews with them reveal that sex education, especially in Catholic high schools tend to be moralistic or prescriptive. When this approach privileges heterosexual sex that results in pregnancy, in effect it excludes or denigrates gay sexuality.<sup>10</sup> In the following conversation, students express how they feel being gay:

Facilitator: What do they say about being gay?

JM: Na it’s okay as long as you don’t have sex.

BR: That’s the stand of the Vatican.

PJ: *Na-brought up lang siya* as a sin. [It was only brought up as a sin.]

Facilitator: It wasn’t ever discussed?

PJ: Never discussed.

BR: In short it’s like God loves the homosexual but condemns the homosexual act... You let the dog be a dog, but you don’t allow him to bark. *Pwede kang gay, pero bawal makipag-relationship* or *makipag-sex*.<sup>11</sup>

York: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2014, 15, accessed April 6, 2018, <https://www.outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/PhilippinesCC.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup>International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, *Kwentong Bebot – Lived Experiences of Lesbians, Bisexual and Transgender Women in the Philippines*, 15–16.

<sup>7</sup>International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, *Kwentong Bebot – Lived Experiences of Lesbians, Bisexual and Transgender Women in the Philippines*, 17.

<sup>8</sup>Eric Julian Manalastas and Raymond Aquino Macapagal, “What Do Filipino Gay Male College Students Want to Learn in Sex Education?,” *Review of Women’s Studies* 15, 1 (2005) 133.

<sup>9</sup>Eric Julian Manalastas and Raymond Aquino Macapagal, “What Do Filipino Gay Male College Students Want to Learn in Sex Education?,” 129.

<sup>10</sup>Manalastas and Macapagal, “What Do Filipino Gay Male College Students Want to Learn in Sex Education?,” 138–139.

<sup>11</sup>Eric Julian Manalastas and Raymond Aquino Macapagal, “What Do Filipino Gay Male College Students Want to Learn in Sex Education?,” 138–139.

[You can be gay but you are not allowed to have a relationship or have sex.]

These interviews show that women and LGBTIQ+ among Philippine youth continue to face unjust treatment such as social pressure, discrimination, rejection, and invalidation and that their experiences of religion can intensify their struggles.

### Overview

The concerns described above reflect the situation of the youth who feel marginalized from church and society as recognized by the Synod of Bishops held in 2018.<sup>12</sup> The Synod resulted in some statements that can encourage and open doors for the youth, including women and “homosexuals.” This endeavour is noteworthy because, through it, the Church discerns ways of walking with the youth rather than alienating them from religion.

However, the problems of the church need to be recognized as social sin which can be understood in terms of four levels as identified by Gregory Baum: First, there are inhumane and unjust trends that have become part of an on-going system; second, these trends become legitimized and reinforced by cultural and religious symbols that promote worldviews and values on which these trends build on; third, the combination of these trends and symbols become mutually reinforced by a false consciousness that influence even well-meaning people to make decisions based on skewed values; and finally, all this false consciousness further generates collective decisions that continue to strengthen unjust and dehumanizing trends.<sup>13</sup> These levels of social sin have been used by Gregory Baum and other authors to explain injustices that pervade society.<sup>14</sup> However, these same levels can also be used to understand the presence of unjust practices concerning gender whether in the church or reinforced by the church. For the church to commit towards improving the situation of young people who are experiencing discrimination and marginalization due to gender, it needs to introduce and sustain positive changes on the level of trends, symbols, and consciousness. Indeed, a collective decision to become a more inclusive and compassionate church that respects diversity does

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<sup>12</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 7.

<sup>13</sup>Mark O’Keefe, “Social Sin and Fundamental Option,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58 (1992) 169; Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology*, New York: Paulist Press, 197, 200–203.

<sup>14</sup>Jeong Kii Min, *Sin and Politics: Issues in Reformed Theology*, Peter Lang, 2009, 82–83.

demand the following imperative emphasized by the Synod: “the Church in her entirety must embrace a decisive, immediate and radical change of perspective!”<sup>15</sup>

This paper is a critical reading of the Synod document concerning women and LGBTIQ+. Parts of the text are together analyzed based on the levels of trends, symbols and consciousness, each level in terms of positive aspects that could foster inclusion and compassion, aspects that express ambivalence, and aspects that need to be challenged so that the Church community might make collective decisions that benefit women and LGBTIQ+ among the youth.

## **Trends**

### **Positive Aspects**

A positive trend expressed in the final document is a growing recognition of women’s importance. The document describes women among those who have responded positively to Jesus.<sup>16</sup> The importance of women’s voices, questions, and participation including decision-making processes in the church today are also highlighted and acknowledged as “a duty of justice.”<sup>17</sup>

The document also prioritizes the accompaniment, inclusion, and pastoral concern for gays, which the document calls “homosexual persons.” The Synod wishes not to reject them but to help them holistically grow, like all young persons.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the document addresses sexual violence by taking a clear position against this and commits to take preventive measures even in its selection and formation of those who will take responsibility for guiding and educating the youth.<sup>19</sup> The Synod recognizes that speaking out regarding experiences of suffering abuse takes courage and thanks to the people who have done this.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 166.

<sup>16</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 82.

<sup>17</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 148.

<sup>18</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 150.

<sup>19</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 29, 150.

<sup>20</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 31.

## Ambivalence

A careful reading of the document nevertheless reveals some ambivalence that can prevent full support of women and LGBTIQ+ youth. Indeed, the document insists on the equality of “man and woman” before God and the rejection of all forms of sexual domination, discrimination, and violence.<sup>21</sup> However, it also emphasizes “the difference between the sexes as a mystery that is constitutive of the human being and cannot be reduced to stereotypes”<sup>22</sup> and “the key anthropological relevance of the difference and reciprocity between men and women.”<sup>23</sup>

These passages retain the perspective that men and women are equal in dignity but are expected to perform complementary roles based on their sex.<sup>24</sup> Passages such as these convey sexual differentiation, without differentiating among the categories of sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, and instead lumps different aspects together “as a mystery constitutive of the human being.” The Synod teaches that “it is to be reductionist to define personal identity on the sole basis of the person’s ‘sexual orientation’”<sup>25</sup> but do we not also commit reductionism when we performatively insist on defining personal identity and a person’s role based on “God-given” or biological sex?

Moreover, while personal identity is indeed made up of more than just one’s sexual orientation, sexual orientation is nevertheless an integral aspect of the whole person.<sup>26</sup> The statement of the student interviewed mentioned above who compares loving “homosexuals” but condemning “homosexual acts” to allowing dogs to be dogs as long as they do not bark expresses how attempts to accept gay persons fall short when with a general rejection of gay relationships.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 13, 150.

<sup>22</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 13.

<sup>23</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 150.

<sup>24</sup>“Catechism of the Catholic Church,” No. 2333–2334 (last modified November 4, 2003), accessed March 17, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).

<sup>25</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 150.

<sup>26</sup> Robert L. Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*, Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2013 (12 edition), 249.

<sup>27</sup>Manalastas and Macapagal, “What Do Filipino Gay Male College Students Want to Learn in Sex Education?,” 138–139.

## Challenge

Two concrete issues that may still be addressed by the church in the coming years to decrease unjust gender-based trends. The first issue concerns women's ordination. The quotation on the importance of women's participation in the discussion above conveys how "female presence" and "female participation" in "all levels" in the church is appreciated; however, one phrase continues to limit the meaning of "all" in the statement: "respecting the role of the ordained minister."<sup>28</sup> This exclusion of women from ordination reflects the ambivalent respect and inclusivity the church continues to have towards women. It seems as though indeed women ought to be encouraged and respected, but only up to a certain point or only within given circumstances on the basis of sex.

The insistence on using "homosexual persons" rather than terms like "gay" or "LGBT" is another concern. The term "LGBT youths" appeared in the *Instrumentum Laboris* but is unfortunately omitted in the final document.<sup>29</sup> While this move may be consistent with a desire to avoid defining the human personality based on sexual orientation, youth who identify themselves as gay or LGBT might prefer terms that are more consistent with their self-identification.<sup>30</sup>

## Symbol

### Positive Aspects

Among the many biblical women mentioned in the final document, two stand out as important symbols for the youth and the church:

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<sup>28</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 148.

<sup>29</sup>"Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod 2018," accessed February 25, 2019, <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>.

<sup>30</sup>James Martin, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, HarperOne, 2018 (Revised, Expanded edition), sec. "Why I'm Writing"; Alexander J. Martos, Patrick A. Wilson, and Ilan H. Meyer, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Health Services in the United States: Origins, Evolution, and Contemporary Landscape," *PLOS ONE* 12, no. 7 (July 10, 2017): 2; The Tablet-w: enquiries@thetablet.co.uk, "Synod's Decision to Drop 'LGBT' from Its Final Document Is a Missed Opportunity for the Church," *The Tablet*, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1200/synod-s-decision-to-drop-lgbt-from-its-final-document-is-a-missed-opportunity-for-the-church>; "Vatican Bishops at Synod Struggle with What to Call Gay People," *Religion News Service*, October 23, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2018/10/23/vatican-bishops-at-synod-struggle-with-what-to-call-gay-people/>

The “Virgin Mary” and Mary Magdalene.<sup>31</sup> These two women tended to be pitted against each other. The Virgin Mary was seen as a symbol of unattainable purity while Mary Magdalene became a symbol of sin and sensuality.<sup>32</sup> This comparison has been detrimental to Mary Magdalene who is often represented as a prostitute or repentant sinner of sexual sins, possessing the sensuality the pure Virgin Mary lacks. This image of Mary Magdalene is a result of Pope Gregory’s combination of several women in the New Testament.<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, the Synod document does not present Mary Magdalene in this way. Rather, she is positively described as defying the darkness of the night out of a desire to see Christ, and as becoming “the first missionary disciple, the apostle of the apostles.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Ambivalence**

Despite their differences, both images are products of a patriarchal imagination of women, which have prescribed expectations of women.<sup>35</sup> The representation of these two women in the Synod document has significantly changed for the better; however, the task of imagining these women remain authoritatively exercised by male clerics resulting in views that continue to reinforce patriarchal values and limit women’s role in the Church.

For instance, even though the document presents the “Virgin Mary” positively, it nevertheless feminizes her according to a limited understanding of what women should be, so much so that to complement her feminine image as the model disciple, the document highlights Joseph her spouse at the end of the description of Mary “Alongside the Virgin, the figure of Joseph her spouse constitutes another exemplary model of vocational response.”<sup>36</sup>

The document also describes Jesus. On the one hand, it shows Jesus as caring for others, journeying with his friends, developing healthy relationships with women, and even sharing in the youth’s

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<sup>31</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 83, 115.

<sup>32</sup>Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, vol. 2, Christianity/History/Women’s Studies, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001, 254.

<sup>33</sup>Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 2:263–270.

<sup>34</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 115.

<sup>35</sup>Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 2:270.

<sup>36</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 83.



experiences of hurt and vulnerability.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, his gender remains highlighted: “Jesus as a young man among the young.”<sup>38</sup>

### Challenge

Emphasizing Jesus as a man needs to be interrogated especially in terms of how this supports a masculine Christology that normalizes a male priesthood.<sup>39</sup> The argument that only males can represent Christ is present in *Sacramentum Ordinis* but is no longer repeated in the more recent document *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the same conclusion remains: Women cannot be priests.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, people tend to imagine the Church as feminine and use feminine pronouns for the Church. The symbols of the cis-gendered male Christ paired with the feminine Church as his spouse continues to communicate a mindset that subscribes to fixed gender roles. In turn, this symbolic pairing limits gender roles in the Church. This limitation becomes exemplified in the process behind the Synod. Despite widespread consultation, a group of all male bishops ultimately decides on final statements and conclusions.

Existing images have to be dismantled for these to be more empowering to women. In the document, Mary’s virginity remains to be emphasized, while Mary Magdalene’s dedication is qualified as “womanly.”

In history, feminine attributes of divinity became more and more associated with Mary because God became more and more imagined as male, distant, judgmental, and masculine.<sup>42</sup> Male clerics tended to describe Mary as the Virgin Mother of God and the Ideal Woman who was “pure, virginal, merciful, queenly, and absolutely

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<sup>37</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 5, 50, 63.

<sup>38</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 63.

<sup>39</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 89.

<sup>40</sup>Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood,” pt. 5, last modified October 15, 1976, accessed August 12, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html); John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, May 22, 1994, accessed August 5, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html).

<sup>41</sup>Jean D’Cunha, “Should Women Be Ordained? Debate in Roman Catholic Church,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, 2 (1995) 85.

<sup>42</sup>Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 2:256.

untouched by sin.”<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Johnson identified two cul-de-sacs that proceed from this historical evolution of the Marian imagination: First, presenting Mary as an ideal woman who in effect alienates other women, and second, depicting Mary as the feminine face of God, which excuses the patriarchal understanding of God as male.<sup>44</sup> In effect, Mary became distant and incomparable to all other women.<sup>45</sup>

It is noteworthy that Mary is presented in the Synod in a more down to earth manner compared to her divine image during the medieval period, in that she is called a young woman and a disciple.<sup>46</sup> Based on the document’s description of Mary, she can be referred to in different ways because of her participation in salvation history: She is a “young woman,” “first disciple of Jesus,” “model of all discipleship,” “Mother,” “merciful teacher,” “companion of the Church.” However, the paragraph is labelled and is concluded with the same traditional title: “Virgin,” as though this was Mary’s most important title.<sup>47</sup> This is similar to the comment of the young woman interviewed: “For a woman, it’s the only thing she can be proud of.”<sup>48</sup>

Mary’s Virginitly is often understood as supporting Christ’s divinity; however, Elizabeth Johnson argues that doctrinally speaking, “Jesus would be God’s beloved child no matter how he was conceived because his sonship is eternal and independent of earthly incarnation.”<sup>49</sup> She also cites Cardinal Ratzinger:

According to the faith of the Church the Sonship of Jesus does not rest on the fact that Jesus had no human father; the doctrine of Jesus’ divinity would not be affected if Jesus had been the product of normal human marriage. For the Sonship of which faith speaks is not a biological but an ontological fact, an event not in time but in God’s eternity.<sup>50</sup>

Another aspect of women’s portrayal in the church is their association with “womanly” or feminine qualities that tend to circumscribe what can be expected of women, even though real

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<sup>43</sup>Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 2:262-263.

<sup>44</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York; London: Continuum, 2006 (New edition), 41-91.

<sup>45</sup>Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 2:263.

<sup>46</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 83.

<sup>47</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 83.

<sup>48</sup>Manalastas and David, “Valuation of Women’s Virginitly in the Philippines,” 38.

<sup>49</sup>Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 237.

<sup>50</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, New York: Seabury Press, 1968, 207-208. Cited in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 237.

women, both cis-gendered women and LBTIQ women, do not necessarily have the same qualities.

The document refers to Mary Magdalene's dedication as "womanly dedication." It seems that this kind of dedication is different from the dedication of the twelve apostles. An important argument against women's ordination that is retained in church documents is that Christ only chose male apostles.<sup>51</sup> What empowering implication can be drawn from the title "apostle to the apostles" given to a woman? Rather than pursuing this line of thinking, the document quickly contains Mary Magdalene in the acceptable feminine image of the Church: "She is the image of the young Church of our dreams."<sup>52</sup>

The Church can use more open-minded and inclusive hermeneutics for more community members to benefit from the women's stories and images, and can also explore readings of scripture that go beyond heteronormative interpretations. The heterosexuality of biblical characters and the heteronormative message are often assumed, and yet other interpretations can also be possible.<sup>53</sup>

## Consciousness

### Positive Aspects

The different symbols that communicate hierarchy and gender inequality can normalize a mindset of domination within the church and society. Fortunately, the Synod document explicitly opposes sexual violence, clericalism, gender discrimination as forms of domination.<sup>54</sup> For instance, it attributes clericalism to a misinterpretation of ministry as "power to be exercised" rather than as "service to be given."<sup>55</sup>

The Synod also recognizes the domination that can exist between "Western" and "non-Western contexts", and critiques the cultural colonization brought about by globalization which may be harmful to the youth:

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<sup>51</sup>John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 1-2.

<sup>52</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 115.

<sup>53</sup>Robert Goss and Mona West, ed., "Introduction," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000, 3-4.

<sup>54</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 30, 13.

<sup>55</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 30.

Many Synod Fathers coming from non-Western contexts point out that in their countries globalization brings with it forms of cultural colonization which uproot young people from their cultural and religious origins. The Church needs to make a commitment to accompany them in this process so that they do not lose sight of the most precious features of their identity.<sup>56</sup>

### **Ambivalence**

The document nevertheless expresses some notions that betray the Church's ambivalence in its support of women and LGBTIQ+ youth, especially in "non-Western" contexts, and hinder its advocacy against domination. The Church retains a heteronormative outlook that conflates sex with gender.<sup>57</sup> This mindset reflects the present catechism.<sup>58</sup> The Synod uses words that signify openness such as "reciprocity and in dialogue," but the assumptions regarding binaries and sexual differences remain the same. Pope Francis accepts these assumptions. He speaks of equal dignity but limits women's roles based on an image of Christ as a male spouse:

Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded. The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion...<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, Pope Francis has earlier speeches against "ideological colonization" that resemble cultural colonization as a form of domination; however, he often combines the issue of ideological colonization with a very negative view of gender theory or gender ideology.<sup>60</sup> Rather than entertain various gender ideologies, prevalent

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<sup>56</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 13.

<sup>57</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," 13.

<sup>58</sup>"CCC," 369, 372.

<sup>59</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, pt. 104, accessed March 20, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html).

<sup>60</sup>"Apostolic Journey to Poland: Meeting with the Polish Bishops in the Cathedral of Kraków (27 July 2016), Francis," accessed February 4, 2019, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papafrancesco\\_20160727\\_polonia-vescovi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papafrancesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html); Francis, "In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from the Philippines to Rome," January 19, 2015, accessed October 18, 2017, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150119\\_srilanka-filippine-conferenza-stampa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150119_srilanka-filippine-conferenza-stampa.html).

church teaching already presupposes a dual anthropology wherein there is a God-given complementary relationship between men and women.<sup>61</sup> Within this worldview, non-binary gender and sexual identities are anomalous.

As such, the term “LGBT” is absent from final document. A caveat also immediately follows the Synod’s articulation of the Church’s commitment against sexual discrimination and violence: “Equally, she reiterates the key anthropological relevance of the difference and reciprocity between men and women...”<sup>62</sup>

Using a negative view of developments in gender theory to criticize cultural or ideological colonialism tends to limit the Church’s openness to both gender diversity and cultural diversity by assuming that there are cultural and religious origins from which young people can be uprooted from and that change is bad. However, culture, as lived by people and not merely as an artefact, is dynamic.<sup>63</sup> There is no one static set of “the most precious features of their identity,” or a definite “cultural and religious origin” to be uprooted from. Instead, what we have are facets of culture validated by the Church as good and original based on its gender ideology.

### **Challenge**

The church exposes its gender ideology by claiming and defending its assumptions about men and women’s roles and relationships. This gender ideology insists on a hierarchical duality between male and female, and a lack of distinction between sex and gender. This kind of gender ideology legitimizes the structures of domination between men and women, priests and laity, heterosexuals and queer, which the Synod itself would like to avoid.

Biblical texts that convey an identity of the chosen people as holy and set apart from other more powerful nations and empires may have opposed the supposed sexual, cultic and cultural practices of outsiders as a form of resistance. This strategy was useful for the survival of a small marginalized nation or group against more

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<sup>61</sup>Agnes M. Brazal, “Harmonizing Power-Beauty: Gender Fluidity in the Migration Context,” *Asian Christian Review* 4, 2 (Winter 2010) 36–40, accessed May 11, 2014, [https://www.academia.edu/2561878/Harmonizing\\_Power-Beauty\\_Gender\\_Fluidity\\_in\\_the\\_Migration\\_Context](https://www.academia.edu/2561878/Harmonizing_Power-Beauty_Gender_Fluidity_in_the_Migration_Context); “Apostolic Journey to Poland: Meeting with the Polish Bishops in the Cathedral of Kraków (27 July 2016) | Francis.”

<sup>62</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 150.

<sup>63</sup>Agnes M. Brazal, “Redeeming the Vernacular: Doing Postcolonial-Intercultural Theological Ethics,” *Asian Horizons* 4, 1 (June 2010) 49–50.

powerful civilizations or colonizers. However, when Christianity also came to power and has taken part in the colonization of others, the outlook that sought to define identity versus others which were once useful for the survival of a small group can become very oppressive.<sup>64</sup>

For ideological or cultural colonization to be avoided, the Church, which has also been an instrument of colonization in the Philippines and other countries, also needs to decolonize. Rather than declare for people what should be normative or original in their culture, the Church can adopt a humbler and more open attitude towards various cultures that are constructed continuously through intercultural interchange. Cross-cultural gender studies reveal that not all cultures have the same dual criteria for male and female expressed in the Church's gender ideology.<sup>65</sup> What the young need today is a genuinely compassionate and listening church amidst all these differences. Rather than downplay differences, recognizing gender diversity and teaching gender theory is more helpful for young people because "it opens up the possibility for young people to find their own way in a world that often confronts them with narrow and cruel social norms."<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The Synod's emphasis on listening with compassion is indeed crucial for building a more inclusive Church community where the youth can feel at home. As the interviews have shown, young women and LGBTIQ+ face difficult challenges and seek support. The final document of the Synod contains many aspects that express the Church's desire to walk with the youth. However, sexual violence, and trends like excluding women from priestly ordination and lack of sensitivity to LGBTIQ+ members of the church need to be corrected. The symbols that support these trends such as the pairing of a masculine Christ with a feminine Church, and the idealization of patriarchal feminine figures, need to be interrogated. On the deepest level, the false consciousness reinforced by these symbols that regard hetero-patriarchy and hegemony as normative or natural, need to be

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<sup>64</sup>Mary Ann Tolbert, "Foreword: What Word Shall We Take Back?," in *Take Back the Word*, ed. Robert Goss and Mona West, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000, viii.

<sup>65</sup>William J. Spurlin, *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities Across Time and Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 131-212.

<sup>66</sup>Judith Butler, "Judith Butler: The Backlash against 'Gender Ideology' Must Stop," *New Statesman America*, last modified January 21, 2019, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/01/judith-butler-backlash-against-gender-ideology-must-stop>.

dismantled. Addressing these issues is crucial to influencing the collective decision of the church to become genuinely more compassionate and inclusive.

On the one hand, if we want to love and respect the people among us whom we have “othered,” we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable. On the other hand, if we only want to remain safe and sure, then we will have to continue guarding ourselves against “others” and their ideas which threaten that stability that we think we have. The Synod has emphasized the Church’s compassion rooted in Christ’s compassion.<sup>67</sup> Jesus challenged social and religious rules not because he was liberal but because he was merciful.<sup>68</sup>

In the Resurrection story, Mary Magdalene is asked by the Risen Christ not to cling to him (Jn 20:11-18). This occurrence can be interpreted in light of this present discussion on gender as Mary being challenged to let go of the certainty in the cis-gendered male Jesus Christ she knew and loved, and more than this open up to a more profound relationship with the Risen Christ who ascends and transcends former more comfortable categories. She responds by opening her heart wider and accepting the mission to “Go and tell the others,” a mission that all the members of the Christian community, regardless of gender, are called to participate in.

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<sup>67</sup>XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” 63.

<sup>68</sup>Jon Sobrino, “Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994, 52.