

Exploring the Laity's Mission in the Philippines in the Light of the New Testament Mission: A Missiological Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the role and mission of the laity within the context of the Philippines, drawing insights from the New Testament's perspective on mission. The research employs a missiological framework to investigate the extent to which the laity actively engages in and contributes to the mission of the Church in the Philippines. This study comprehensively analyzes the laity's mission and its significance for the Philippine church context by examining biblical teachings, historical precedents, and contemporary practices. The findings of this research contribute to the scholarly discourse on missiology and provide practical insights for empowering the laity to effectively participate in the mission of the Church, thereby fostering holistic transformation and renewal within Filipino society.

The missiological and theological aspects of the research will be used to interpret the Philippine Context of where we find the laity. This study follows the triple "R" steps: Reality, Reflection, and Response or the See, Judge, and Act steps of contextual research.

This research looks into the present situation or context of Filipino laity's awareness and involvement in the Church's mission in the Philippines. This context, which is a product of the study on the 500 years of Christianity, is interpreted and evaluated in the light of the Church's teachings on mission. The present context of the missionary outreach of the Filipino laity in their missionary outreach in the light of the New Testament. Lastly, a missionary praxis for the laity is here proposed.

Keywords: Laity, Mission, Church in the Philippines, New Testament

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Introduction

The Sacred Scriptures is an important deposit of faith. It contains the truth of faith, experienced in the life of God's people both in the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament God is seen as a missionary God who is involved in the history of the People of God. The *missio Dei* is being done by Yahweh himself, and so, mission is said to be present even in the Old Testament. The mission in the Old Testament is an involvement of God in history, the beginning of mission. According to Roger Hedlund "Israel's position may be defined in terms of her missionary role as the agent of God-and the locus of the presence of God-among the nations. Yet, the primary focus is upon God who acts in the world of the nations."¹ Thus, mission has its origin in the Old Testament which the New Testament continues depicting the life, teachings and actions of Christ, and also the life of the early Christians.

Yahweh is not only the beginning of mission but also its end, its goal seen especially in the New Testament. According to Johannes Nissen: "The endpoint of this Gospel's missiology is not Jesus but the Father. The Father, alone is not sent. He is the origin and the goal of all the testimony of the Gospel (John 1:1-18 and 17:20-23)."² In the New Testament is to be found explicit teachings on mission compared with the Old Testament. What makes the New Testament different from the Old Testament, in missiological perspective, is Jesus Christ himself. David Bosch states that in the Old Testament there is indeed "no traditional understanding of mission as the sending of preachers to distant places"³. Further, Bosch quotes Rzepkoski with total agreement that: "The decisive difference between the Old and New Testament is mission. The New Testament is a book about mission."⁴

The Church in the Philippines has celebrated her 500th year anniversary yet the question remains whether we have become sacramentalized, Christianized, or evangelized? Have we lived up to the real meaning of the term Christian, as one who ardently follows Christ? In this paper the missionary

spirit, activities and convictions of the laity will be evaluated in the light of the New Testament missionary paradigm and zeal. The contextual data comes from the study entitled, "Gifted to Give 2021: Lights and Shadows on the Present State of Catholic Christianity in the Philippines" a commissioned research by The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to the University of Santo Tomas Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics (CTRSE). The study aims to look into the present state of Catholic Christianity as a historical account during the 500th anniversary. The study has included hearing the laity's voice in the Philippine Catholic Church.

Methodology

The missiological and theological aspects of the research will be used to interpret the Philippine Context of where we find the laity. This study follows the triple "R" steps: Reality, Reflection, and Response or the See, Judge, and Act steps of contextual research.

Table 1 and Table 4, taken from the study of the Catholic Laity in the Philippines, cover the demographic profile and the laity's disposition as Catholics.

Table 1. Catholic Lay Respondents' Select Demographic Profile

Indicators	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender (n=35874)		
Male	10079	28.1
Female	25795	71.9
Civil Status (n=35803)		
Single	13249	37.0
Married	18276	51.0
Widowed	3016	8.4
Separated	731	2.0
Annulled	59	0.2
Others	472	1.3
Type of Wedding Ceremony (n=20620)		
Non-Catholic Wedding	150	0.7
Civil Wedding	3173	15.4

1 Roger W. Hedlund, "Mission Paradigms in the Old Testament," *Indian Journal of Theology* 39, no. 1 (1997): 26.

2 Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 76.

3 Ibid., 17.

4 Ibid.

Catholic Church Wedding	17275	83.8
Mixed (Catholic and Civil)	22	0.1
Highest Educational Attainment (n=35261)		
Elementary Level	1619	4.6
Elementary Graduate	723	2.1
High School Level	6494	18.4
High School Graduate	4214	12.0
Vocational Level	1894	5.4
Vocational Graduate	1001	2.8
College/University Level	7340	20.8
Bachelor's Degree	9877	28.0
Master's Degree	1793	5.1
Doctorate	306	0.9
Nature of Last School Attended (n=35874)		
Catholic	9906	27.6
Non-Catholic Sectarian	1232	3.4
Private Non-Sectarian	7584	21.1
Public/State School	17152	47.8
Are your parents Catholic? (n=35874)		
None of them are Catholic.	485	1.4
Only one of them is Catholic.	1235	3.4
Both are Catholic.	34154	95.2
Social Media Engagements (Multiple Response; n=34686)		
Facebook	32778	91.4
Instagram	9327	26.0
YouTube	14352	40.0
TikTok	8182	22.8
Others	541	1.5

Table 2. Catholic Lay Respondents' Dispositions as a Catholic

Indicators (n=35874)	Yes		No		I do not know Interpretation	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
I am proud to be a Catholic.	35337	98.5	116	0.3	421	1.2
I am a practicing Catholic.	34869	97.2	398	1.1	607	1.7

Results and Discussion

Understanding the demographic profile of Catholic lay respondents is essential for discerning their engagement with the Church, society, and mission. In this paper presentation, we delve into Table 1's data, which provides a comprehensive overview of various demographic indicators among Catholic lay respondents.

Gender Dynamics: The data reveals a significant gender disparity among respondents, with females comprising the majority at 71.9%, nearly double the number of male respondents. This gender disproportion prompts questions regarding the differential roles, experiences, and perspectives within the Catholic community, which can significantly impact missiological strategies and outreach efforts.

Civil Status and Marriage Patterns: The distribution of civil status among respondents offers insights into the familial and relational contexts within the Catholic community. While over half of the respondents are married, a substantial portion remains single. Moreover, the prevalence of Catholic Church wedding ceremonies among the married respondents (83.8%) underscores the sacramental significance of marriage within Catholicism and highlights the importance of family life in the faith tradition.

Educational Attainment and Institutional Background: The educational profile of Catholic lay respondents showcases varying levels of academic achievement, with bachelor's degrees being the most common attainment. Notably, a considerable number of respondents are still pursuing their bachelor's degrees or are at the high school level. The distribution of respondents across different types of educational institutions reflects the diverse educational landscapes within which Catholic individuals are formed, suggesting implications for

their worldview, values, and perspectives on faith.

Parental Influence and Religious Affiliation: The overwhelming majority of respondents (95.2%) report both parents as Catholics, emphasizing the significance of familial, religious upbringing in shaping individuals' faith identities. However, the presence of respondents with non-Catholic or mixed religious backgrounds highlights the complexity of religious socialization and underscores the interplay between familial, societal, and personal factors in religious adherence and commitment.

Social Media Engagement: The prevalence of social media engagement among Catholic lay respondents underscores the importance of digital platforms as avenues for communication, community-building, and evangelization. Facebook emerges as the dominant platform for virtual interaction, followed by YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, reflecting the diverse digital preferences and practices among Catholics.

The demographic profile of Catholic lay respondents provides valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of faith, identity, and engagement within the Catholic community. By examining these demographic indicators through a missiological lens, we could gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges for effective mission and outreach in contemporary society. This analysis sets the stage for further exploration and reflection on strategies for fostering vibrant faith communities and advancing the Church's mission in the world.

Belongingness

Belongingness is an important element of the Church embracing the reality of Catholicism. The Catholic Church includes people from all walks of life, from saints to sinners, from the rich to the poor. Inclusivity calls for opening the door to other people of different cultures, religions, and socioeconomic status. Pope Francis even mentioned the Church being out in the streets so that the Church would reach out to those who are usually neglected by society.

The overwhelming majority of respondents

expressed pride in being Catholic (98.5%) and identified themselves as practicing Catholics (97.2%). This indicates a strong sense of affiliation and identification with the Catholic Church among the surveyed group. The data show a positive affirmation of Catholic identity. The high degree of the Catholic's internal practices and involvement speaks of pastoral care for the lay Catholics. The *ad intra* and *ad extra* component of mission is seen in the life of the Catholics. RM The high percentage of respondents who consider themselves practicing Catholics suggests active participation in religious rituals, sacraments, and community activities associated with the Catholic faith. This engagement is crucial for understanding the depth of commitment and involvement within the faith community. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has a challenge in making the Church a missionary Church of the laity becoming missionary disciples.

The data implies that the respondents have likely developed a sense of belonging to the Catholic Church. This feeling of connection and attachment could stem from various factors, including religious upbringing, spiritual experiences, and participation in communal worship and service activities. The data shows a positive sign that the seeds of the word are already present in the people Vatican II Decree *Ad Gentes* no. 9 (Missionary Activity of the Church). Understanding the strong sense of belonging among the surveyed group can inform missiological strategies (*ad intra*) to nurture and deepen this affiliation. For example, fostering community-building initiatives, providing opportunities for spiritual growth and education, and emphasizing the communal aspects of faith can strengthen the bond between individuals and the Church.

While the data indicates a high level of affinity with the Catholic Church among the respondents, it's essential to recognize potential challenges, such as changing demographics, secular influences, internal doctrinal debates, and contemporary social trends such as urbanization and migration. The number of Catholics who feel that they belong to the Catholic Church have to be trained as missionaries. Given the fact that mission today is not only *mission ad gentes*, but also *mission inter gentes*. That is, because of migration, urbanization and mediatization people of other culture and religion are "here with us

living between and among us”⁵. It is worth to note, however, that the Catholics think that they can be missionaries in their own right and that believe that priests and religious are not only the ones who are to be considered missionaries. Thus, focusing and capitalizing on the opportunities can enhance the effectiveness of missiological efforts within the Catholic context. In doing mission, we have to embrace our identity while opening ourselves into accepting others as children of God. If only the percentage of those who are active in the Church become missionary disciples, the Church in the Philippines would have reached other people who do not feel that they belong.

The data highlights the significance of the sense of belonging to the Catholic Church among surveyed lay respondents. It underscores the importance of fostering and nurturing this connection through strategic missiological approaches to strengthen faith identity, engagement, and community participation.

There are also some significant constitutive missionary elements that are worth mentioning as a result of the study such as:

Concern for Indigenous Populations: The significant majority (84.2%) expressing disturbance over the exploitation of indigenous populations reflects a heightened sensitivity to social justice issues. This aligns with the Church’s commitment to defending the rights and dignity of vulnerable groups, echoing themes of preferential option for the poor and marginalized in Catholic social teaching. The encyclical *Laudato Si’* by Pope Francis underscores the need to protect indigenous communities and respect their rights and cultures.

Missionary Identity: The majority (73.9%) identifying themselves as missionaries in their own contexts suggests a recognition of the call to evangelize and bear witness to their faith in everyday life. This reflects the Church’s emphasis on the universal call to mission and evangelization, empowering lay Catholics to actively participate in spreading the Gospel. The document *Evangelii Gaudium* highlights the role of every Christian in the mission of evangelization.

⁵ Antonio Pernia, “The State of Mission Today,” *Verbum SVD* 55, no.1 (2-14): 15.

Aid to the Poor and the Needy: The consensus (83.8%) on the obligation to assist the poor and needy, especially during the pandemic, underscores a commitment to charitable action and alleviating suffering. This resonates with the Church’s emphasis on works of mercy and compassionate service as integral expressions of Christian love.

Sacredness of Human Life and Environmental Stewardship: The data suggests a strong belief among Catholic lay respondents that addressing environmental issues, such as climate change, is integral to upholding the sacredness of human life. This aligns with Catholic social teaching, particularly the concept of stewardship, which emphasizes humanity’s responsibility to care for and protect the environment as part of God’s creation. This principle is strongly articulated in *Laudato Si’* where Pope Francis emphasizes, “Our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* no. 1)

However, there are also areas of divergence:

Religious Involvement in Politics: A significant proportion (59.3%) disagree with the involvement of religious figures in political issues. This reflects a nuanced perspective on the separation of church and state, highlighting concerns about religious interference in secular governance. The document *Gaudium et Spes* emphasizes the need for the Church to maintain a prophetic voice in societal issues without directly engaging in political power.

Government Control over Media: Roughly half (48.9%) believe in government control over media reporting, indicating a complex stance on freedom of information and the role of the state in regulating public discourse. The CCC stresses the importance of free expression and the right to information, balanced with the responsibility to protect the common good and prevent the spread of false information.

In conclusion, this missiological analysis reveals both alignment and tension between Catholic moral teachings and societal attitudes, highlighting opportunities and challenges for mission and evangelization in contemporary contexts marked

by global crises and social complexities.

Possibility of Mission

The chosen People of God in the Old Testament are agents of mission although God himself is the active agent. "Israel's position may be defined in terms of her missionary role as the agent of God-and the locus of the presence of God-among the nations. Yet, the primary focus is upon God who acts in the world of the nations."⁶ This, nonetheless, will change in the New Testament. The people of the New Testament who are following Jesus as God and savior will be the agents of mission. As such, "we cannot, with integrity, reflect on what mission might mean today unless we turn to the Jesus of the New Testament."⁷

What then could possibly be the reasons in the New Testament that made mission possible? Like in the Old Testament it is God's presence and action that made mission possible. In the New Testament, the presence of God, who became man, is the crucial and the most important starting point in the life of Christians. Jesus, who was sent by the Father, was also to send His disciples. This is evidently stated in the Gospel of John 20:19 "As the Father sent me, so I send you" and John 17:18 "As you sent me into the world, so I sent them to the world". Jesus lived first among the company of people so that the people may experience him. The incarnation of Jesus made his disciples experience Him. This experience will eventually continue to be experienced not only by the original disciples but also by those whom the Gospel was preached to. Mission begins with God becoming man and that our task should be that "the Word has to become flesh in every new context,"⁸ making Jesus alive in every culture. Thus, inculturation is still true today as a way of evangelizing cultures, wherein theology is also enriched by a culture. Jesus becomes a model for mission:

He modeled the constant teaching and preaching ministry from cities to villages. From open air preaching and teaching to private encounters were His methodologies. He was always teaching, always seeking an open heart. No one was beyond

His acceptance, which provoked the accusations of the Pharisees, "Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matt 9:11).⁹

Jesus as the envoy sent by the Father reveals who the Father is. In the Gospel of John "Jesus does not attract attention for himself for the Father is the center of the Gospel."¹⁰ The one being sent knows well the message, and in the case of Jesus, He knows very well the sender and origin of the message. Jesus, thus prays "that they may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21). Jesus and the Father are one, and so the one sent and the one who sends must also become one. Such is the situation of the disciples who were sent by Jesus. They became living witnesses of the Gospel. They were able to see the Father in Jesus and so has the task to also to reveal Jesus to other especially his paschal mystery. What they have seen with their eyes, they have to proclaim. "The resurrection was an experience of "seeing" God's presence through Christ in their midst, in their place and in their circumstances."¹¹

Missionary trajectories are present in the study Gifted to give. The demographic profile, the section that deals with belongingness, and other missiological issues such as the care for the earth and the poor, missionary identity and concern for indigenous population, to name a few are signs that mission and missionary activities are present in the Philippine local Church. The presence of God and the evangelization in the name of Jesus are evident signs of the presence of mission. Jesus was sent by the Father, and the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit while the Trinity sent for the Church. The presence of the modern disciples in the person of the laity evidently shows the presence of God in the Christian community here in our country. Although there is the problem of passivity in terms of being truly active in the missionary work. The laity know their mission and are fulfilling their tasks as missionaries in their own situation. The challenge today is for the laity to really become living witnesses of the Gospel of Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

6 Hedlund, "Mission Paradigms in the Old Testament," 27

7 David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 22.

8 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 21.

9 Don Fanning, "The New Testament and Missions" (2009). Themes of Theology that Impacts Missions. Paper 2. http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_theo/2 accessed Nov 28, 2019

10 Nissen, New Testament and Mission, 76.

11 Ibid., 77.

Missionary Paradigms and Significance of Mission

It is precisely the experience of the Apostles, and later their witnessing, that made the mission possible. This witnessing is a result of their encounter with Jesus while the New Testament people also had an experience of Jesus. "Mission was shaped by its active participants, not by philosophers, nor by its spectators and critics."¹² On this account that the experience by the people of Christ and the Apostles as missionaries is essential in the coming about of mission. Mission is not about too much conceptualization or theorizing than putting into practice what one has heard and experienced. Such witnessing can be found in the Gospel of Luke 24:46-48 as Jesus tells His disciples: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." The whole chapter twenty four of Luke can be seen as the story of how eye-witnesses (autoptai) became faith witnesses (martyres).¹³ Thus, those who were primarily eye witnesses became faith witnesses to the nations.

Those who are witnesses of the faith proclaim Christ in words and deeds. The work of liberation in Luke 4:16-30 which tells of Jesus' mission, will later on be his mission to other people, mentioned in Luke 4:43: "To the other towns I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent." Antonio Pernia states that: "For some missiologists, for all practical purposes, has replaced Matthew's Great Commission (Mt 28:16-30)."¹⁴ Being a witness, then entails action, being "theologians on the road and task theologians"¹⁵ and not becoming what we call "arm chair theologian".

After the resurrection, Jesus and the Father send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a very important role in mission in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit will not replace Jesus in the community but "intensifies"¹⁶ Jesus' presence. "The power of

the missionary preaching and testimony before hostile powers to the presence of the Holy Spirit."

¹⁷ In the Acts of the Apostles 1:8 the Holy Spirit strengthened and moved the Apostles to become witnesses. "The accounts in Acts, then, confirms a simple yet profound fact of early Christian experience: God's work of salvation promised in the Scriptures, proclaimed by Jesus, and effected by the Spirit is ultimately entrusted to very fallible human beings. Their "witness" is the agency of the universal salvation."¹⁸ The Holy Spirit, then, must be listened to special today so that the signs of the times may be discerned with boldness, trust and humility believing that the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8) and leads us outside the camp/gates (Hebrew 13:13).

Even St Paul who claims to be the Apostle to the Gentile has to become a living witness. He proclaimed Christ openly and would even go to the Areopagus to engage into debate and discussion. "Paul's confidence was derived from the assurance that when he proclaimed the gospel God was working through that proclamation in the hearts of the unbelievers enabling Paul's message to "open their eyes" to understand the truth, recognize their guilt, and believe what was declared from the Scriptures."¹⁹ Proclamation has to be bold as the missionary believes and trusts that the Holy Spirit guides and protects him/her.

It is pointed out that God is the origin of mission, that is, *missio Dei*. This *missio Dei* will have its embodiment in the person of Jesus the missionary par excellence. He is the model of the one being sent, and the one who sends. The greatest motivation that there is God as the sender is love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus, on the other hand accomplishes his mission by putting in flesh the meaning of this love from the Father. For Jesus the fuel for missionary work is love to the extent of offering one's self, even to the point of death. "This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life to one's friends" (John 15:12-13). Witnessing, proclamation,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Donal Sennior and Carrol Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations For Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 275.

¹⁹ Fanning, "New Testament and Mission," 13.

inculturation, or in the new mission theology, dialogue as mission paradigms must have its origin from God. Missionary models and paradigms are applied not without careful discernment of one's love with God and with the people.

Focusing on the high percentage of belongingness among the laity is a positive sign of the church having a missionary outreach. The Church works towards inclusivity. The laity has to acknowledge the paradigm shift of mission wherein we move from the Church-centered to God-centered way of doing mission. And the situational shift wherein, in the world, we experience the so-called mission in reverse. The missionaries are now coming from the south and the east rather than the north and west. The laity are now considered new missionaries, especially Filipinos who are not free from the mega-migration happening around the world. Filipinos migrate and when they migrate they bring with them not only their culture but also their religion.

In sharing in the mission of the Church, the laity must always get themselves involved with the world as a "salt of the earth", a light of the world," changing it from the inside, permeating it with truth and light, just as *Lumen Gentium* indicates:

"But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. . . . It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer (LG no. 31)."

The New Testament is basically a book of mission. Bosch added that to reflect on what the mission might mean today, we need to turn to Jesus of the New Testament, God's Self-communication to us. Jesus' mission is all-encompassing. It embraces both the poor and rich, both the oppressed and the oppressor, both the wicked and the upright. It eradicates alienation and breaking down of the walls of hostility, of crossing boundaries between individuals and groups. It is basically centered on the reign of God (Bosch 1991).

Conclusion

The mission of sending, of being one with the sender is important in mission. One needs to be sent, to accept an order, a mission so that one may cross boundaries (Mk 16:15-16), make disciples of all nation (Mt 28:19-20), liberate peoples (Luke 4:16-30) and be moved by the Acts of the Spirit (Acts 1:18). Mission belongs to God as stated in *Ad Gentes* for "The Church is missionary by her very nature since from the Son and the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin in accordance with the decree of the Father."²⁰ Mission, thus, belongs to God and missionaries participate in the *missi Dei* or *missio Trinitatis*. Thus, the call of Pope Francis to become missionary disciples is very much present in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament. They have lived what it means to love Christ and the people. Love being the source of mission, the source of life.

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