Toward Synodality and Social Transformation: Lived Religion of Select Catholic Women Servant Leaders

Fides A. Del Castillo

Abstract: Basic ecclesial communities (BECs) are flourishing in the Philippines. While many Filipina Catholics are leading the “new way of being Church,” little research has been conducted on their lived religion. Investigating the servant leadership of women in BECs provides us with a better understanding of the indispensable contributions of grassroots women to the Church and society toward synodality and transformation. As a response to this research gap, this study explores the concepts of faith and praxis among Filipina Catholic servant leaders (bai) of BECs in Mindanao. In this article, laylayan theology is used as a framework, and empirical phenomenology as a method of analysis to draw attention to BECs as a locus theologicus and privilege the marginalized voices of the bai. The study reveals that the select bai conceptualize the Catholic faith as personal yet ecclesial. The Church can participate in the missio Dei by fostering the communion of communities and engaging in social transformation. In addition, the bai maintain that the Church can remain relevant to the signs of the times by fostering fraternal collaboration of communities, evangelizing the youths, and promoting sacramental attitudes. The study affirms that women have the genuine freedom to realize their Christian identity and vocations, and one way to achieve this is through active participation in BECs.

Keywords: ecclesiology; basic ecclesial communities; Mindanao; bai; Philippines; laylayan theology; phenomenology; communion

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church recognizes the significance of social location, particular cultures, human experience, and social change in ecclesiology. In Ecclesia in Asia, John Paul II (1999) teaches that the diversity of culture, language, beliefs, and traditions in Asia forms part of the history and patrimony of humankind. In its multiplicity, the Catholic Church calls for openness to further reveal the face of Jesus in Asia. The role of women in the Church’s mission of love and service greatly contributes to bringing the message of Christ to Asian people, most especially the poor and the marginalized. Pope Francis (2013) in Evangelii Gaudium also stressed the vitally important role and contribution of women to the Church and society. Women in many communities share pastoral responsibilities with priests and ministers. They guide families and community members in offering theological reflections that are attuned to the challenges of the time. Hence, a more inclusive female presence in the Church is necessary to hear their voices and learn more from them.

At the heart of synodality, the call for “a new way of being church,” that is grounded on the people is one of the vision of Pope Francis (Luciani 2019). This call is thriving in Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines, whose population is predominantly Christian (Bautista 2014). Many Filipino Catholic families gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist in groups called basic ecclesial communities (BECs). While BECs are closely linked to their pastors, lay leaders regularly minister to them (Catholic Church Bishop’s Conference of the Philippines 1992). BECs are located in culturally diverse areas
(Baring et al. 2021). However, the members of the BEC are all familiar with each other by name and feel that they are responsible for one another. According to the 2019 Nationwide Survey on BECs (Baring et al. 2021), many Filipina Catholics actively participate in them. The goals of BECs include, but are not limited to, “(1) finding God’s presence, (2) building communities, (3) changing oppressive structures, and 4) contributing to social transformation” (Baring et al. 2021, p. 259). BECs are infused with the Christian faith and are committed to human development and social transformation (Gabriel 2021). Thus, BECs continue Christ’s life and mission to grassroots communities (Baring et al. 2021, p. 230).

Religion scholars and theologians have taken a keen interest in the significance of basic ecclesial communities in the Philippine Catholic Church. Francisco (2021) describes the BECs as a particular sociological incarnation of the Christian community and asserts that they provide life and energy to the community that they belong to. Baring et al. (2021) posit that BECs promote the priestly, kingly, and prophetic mission of Christ which results in a new evangelizing fervor to the Church. De Mesa and Cacho (2012) assert that BECs play a part in the mission of community building, and that they transform the lives of the Church today. Dagmang (2021) observes that BECs enable broader forms of parish participation among its members and that women’s active involvement in BECs provides opportunities for them to discover and embody the different aspects of their identity and mission. Moreover, Brazal (2019a) proffers a shared ecclesiological vision in which the ordained and the laity, men and women, are equal partners in church ministries. Interestingly, in Mindanao (the second-largest island in the Philippines), many Catholic laywomen have taken a dynamic role in the Church’s life and led the BECs.

Although contemporary studies on BECs in the Philippines currently exist, to the best of my knowledge, there is a paucity of research on the lived religion of Filipina Catholic servant leaders of BECs in Mindanao. Servant leaders, in this study, refer to people “leading by example, fostering self-awareness, and promoting behaviors that serve the greater good of the organization and broader communities” (Joo et al. 2018, p. 2). Servant leaders of religious groups exercise normative influence rather than economic or remunerative power (Andersen 2004; Joo et al. 2018, p. 2). In this paper, the term bai is used to refer to Filipina Catholic servant leaders of BECs in Mindanao. “Bai is an honorific title for a woman tribal leader among the indigenous groups in Southern Mindanao. [ . . . ] It connotes a strong woman who can equally become a leader in the community” (Brazal 2019b, p. 64).

In response to the aforementioned gap in research, this study examines the notions of select bai regarding the Catholic faith, the mission of the Church, and their participation in missio Dei. It highlights the important contributions of women in the Church’s life and the response of BECs on current social issues. In addition, it hopes to shed light on contemporary ecclesiology in the Philippines and the missionary discipleship of Filipina Catholic servant leaders. The study specifically answers the following questions:

Objectives

This article documents and critically reflects upon the notions of select bai regarding the Catholic faith, the mission of the Church, and their participation in missio Dei. It highlights the important contributions of women in the Church’s life and the response of BECs on current social issues. In addition, it hopes to shed light on contemporary ecclesiology in the Philippines and the missionary discipleship of Filipina Catholic servant leaders. The study specifically answers the following questions:
1. How does the Christian faith impact Filipina Catholic leaders at the grassroots level; 
2. What is the mission of the Church according to the bai; 
3. How can the Philippine Catholic Church participate in the missio Dei according to the bai; 
4. What is the “new way of being Church” as defined and practiced by the bai and the BECs; 
5. In what ways can the bai broaden our understanding of participation in the mission Dei in modern times?

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1. The Salience of the Catholic Faith and the Church among Filipinos

The Republic of the Philippines is a sovereign state in archipelagic Southeast Asia. It is divided into three island groups, namely Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The Philippine colonial era spanned 333 years of Spanish and 48 years of American subjugation and a brief occupation by Japan during World War II. It was not until 1946 that the country became independent. It was in 1521 that the Spanish expedition led by Ferdinand Magellan arrived on one of the Philippine islands in the Visayas, which began the Christianization of the Philippines. The subsequent proselytization efforts of the Catholic missionaries and the over three centuries of Spanish colonial government facilitated the embedding of the Catholic faith in the country (del Castillo 2015). Although approximately 80% of 110 million Filipinos profess the Roman Catholic faith (World Trade Press 2011), religion is not a monolithic entity in the Philippines. Various Christian denominations such as Christian Churches, Evangelicals, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), and Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church) are present in the religious landscape (del Castillo et al. 2021a). It is also common for Chinese Buddhists (Dy 2012) and some Hindus (Hutter 2012) to freely navigate religious space. Muslim populations in the Philippines number about 5% (World Trade Press 2011), the majority of whom live in Mindanao (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017a). The socio-religious landscape of Mindanao was dramatically altered in the 1960s by Christian migrants from Luzon and Visayas, who settled in the region (Raluto 2021). Approximately 57% of Mindanao’s 24 million residents belong to the Roman Catholic Church, while 23.4% declare Islam as their religion (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017b).

The Christian faith is essential to many Filipinos (Patino 2020). Contemporary empirical studies on religiosity reveal that many Filipino Catholics are highly religious and have a profound religious life (del Castillo et al. 2021b). When Filipino youths face academic troubles, financial difficulties, tenuous relationships, the death of a family member, or romantic breakdowns, religion can be a coping resource. During trials of faith, Filipino Catholic youths ask God for forgiveness, seek God’s love and care, and seek a stronger connection with God (del Castillo and Alino 2020). Additionally, Cordilleran youths (indigenous peoples of Northern Luzon) practice autochthonous rituals along with leading an active Christian life (del Castillo 2022b). In addition, religion is an important part of the lives of some Filipinos who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) (del Castillo et al. 2021b, p. 14).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, Filipino Christians emphasized the importance of faith against a virulent disease (Patino 2020). Some Catholic communities practiced dungaw (placing religious images near a house window) to ask God for mercy and protection from sickness (del Castillo et al. 2021c). The Church provided face masks and protective equipment to health workers, began feeding programs for the poor, and welcomed the homeless into their congregations (del Castillo et al. 2020). Moreover, it provided formative counseling and pastoral guidance to people coping with mortality, coping, and recovery issues related to COVID-19 (Galang et al. 2021).
2.2. Basic Ecclesial Communities: A “New Way of Being Church”

BECs are the local expressions of the Church (Picardal 2011). It is a church of the poor and a community of disciples who live together, serve in synodality, and participate in Christ’s prophetic, kingly, and priestly ministry. John (1991) in Redemptoris Missio teaches that:

[ . . . ] “ecclesial basic communities” are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a “civilization of love.” These communities decentralize and organize the parish community, to which they always remain united. [ . . . ] (Art. 51)

The BECs can be a viable model for the Church in Asia. The members are guided by Catholic doctrine and are praxis-oriented. They minister to their families first, then to the community as a whole. As grassroots Catholics, they understand the struggles Christians face in society. Therefore, laypeople can make a valuable contribution to ecclesiology. As stated by Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, BECs usher in the following paradigm shifts:

(a) From individualism to community: Members of the BECs gradually shed off individualistic attitudes regarding their faith and religion (God and I) and begin to understand the basic relationships with their neighbors (I–Thou–We–God);
(b) From sacramentalism to ritualism and integral faith: Members of BECs consider and practice their faith beyond the mere celebration of rituals and sacraments, and are deeply aware of the social implications of their faith on Christian mission and day-to-day living;
(c) From non-involvement to co-responsibility: In the BECs, church people are impelled by their faith to participate not only in their intra-BEC activities but also in the outward reach of church mission into the socio-political community, as an imperative of co-responsibility in mission;
(d) From corporal works of mercy to justice: BECs are very much aware of the importance of traditional works of charity, but their faith impels them to do more and, therefore, to act on behalf of justice and social transformation; and
(e) From clericalism to lay-centeredness: In the BECs a paradigm shift takes place regarding the roles of the clergy and religious and the role of the lay people. The principles of co-responsibility and solidarity determine both the process and the level of decision-making. Thus, a process of “de-clericalization” and a corresponding “lay empowerment” takes place in BECs (Rebustillo 2018, p. 382).

2.3. BECs in Mindanao: Promoting Social Transformation, Stewardship, and Peace

In Mindanao, the BECs are concrete manifestations of a renewed church. The lay-led church communities can impact both the human and nonhuman members of the community of creation (Raluto 2021). As Mindanao has the largest share of poor people in the Philippines, the various BECs in the region strive to develop sustainable and effective social action programs. These programs promote total human development and social transformation (Raluto 2021). There are also some BECs that engage in interreligious dialogue with Muslim communities in Mindanao. A program called Duyog (accompany) Ramadan, founded by Bishop Bienvenido Tuddut, encourages BECs to accompany Muslim neighbors through prayer and fasting during Ramadan.

Maintaining peace and preserving creation pose the most pressing challenges in Mindanao. Despite its abundance of natural resources, the region has faced ecological challenges due to indiscriminate commercial logging, open-pit mining, and monoculture agriculture (Raluto 2021). In light of Laudato si’ (Francis 2015), the Catholic Church in Mindanao and the BECs embrace a non-anthropocentric vision of the community as well as an ecological praxis of kinship with all creatures (Raluto 2021). Currently, there is a conflict between the Philippine government and the communist New People’s Army (NPA) in Mindanao (Holden 2009). As Jesus emphasizes peace in his words and works (Curran 2004), the BECs declare their communities as zones of peace and refuse to assist either the AFP or the NPA. The neutrality of the BECs prevents the AFP from winning the hearts and
minds of the people (a classic counterinsurgency tactic), and at the same time prevents the NPA from pursuing the protracted people’s war from the countryside (a classic insurgency tactic) (Holden 2009, p. 200).

3. Methodology

Laylayan theology expresses the identity of a particular believing community—the Filipino Catholics from the margins—and hopes to help them deal with the social change that comes upon them. It privileges the other by intently listening to their voices and proclaiming their missional way of living the gospel. As a theology that proceeds from the people and goes back to the people, it critically reflects upon the personal and communal relationship of the marginalized with God. More importantly, laylayan theology brings to the fore the active participation of the people from the margins in the missio Dei. By revealing the missionary discipleship of the marginalized followers of Christ and amplifying their prophetic voices, laylayan theology advocates for those in the peripheries and fosters prophetic dialogue (del Castillo 2022b, p. 4). This qualitative study uses laylayan theology to reveal how select BECs in Mindanao are working to untie the knotted systems (Scapp 2020) in society. In addition, it emphasizes the bai’s missionary way of life amid poverty, inadequate social services, and limited economic opportunities (USAID 2022).

Data for this study were collected from an open-ended survey administered by the researcher to select participants of the 4th BEC National Assembly held in Davao City, Mindanao (Fuentes 2019). The respondents were made aware of the aims of the research. After filling out the informed consent and demographics, the interlocutors answered the following survey questions:

1. Why is the Catholic faith important to you;
2. For you, what is the mission of the Church;
3. In these modern times, how can the Church fulfill its mission?

The researcher then collated the data and selected the responses of 30 Filipina Catholic servant leaders of BECs in Mindanao. The participants’ age range was between 30 to 50 years old. The majority of the participants were from urban areas. An empirical phenomenology process was then employed by the researcher. Creswell (1998) recommends 20–30 participants for phenomenological studies. Hence, this study had a good sampling size. Moreover, Aspers (2009) pointed out that empirical phenomenology is an approach that is used to define the focus of phenomenology. It comes from the assumption that a scientific explanation is grounded in the meaning structure of those being studied. To validate the results of the unfolding of phenomenal experiences, subject matter experts were consulted to check its reliability.

The following steps were also done. First, the researcher compiled the bai’s perspectives and experiences. First-order constructs were derived from organized responses. In conversation with Quevedo’s assertions on the fundamental changes ushered in by BECs on the Church (Rebustillo 2018), the researcher determined the first-order constructs’ patterns or themes (i.e., second-order constructs). The second-order constructs revealed the “new way of being Church” as lived by the bai and the BECs. Then, the researcher critically reads the second-order constructs in light of the Gospel, Catholic faith, and traditions. Lastly, the researcher discussed the bai’s contribution to the new evangelization, ecclesiology, and Christian mission.

4. Results and Discussion

Tables 1–3 show the responses of the interlocutors and the second-order constructs:
**Table 1.** Why is the Catholic faith important to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Constructs</th>
<th>Second-Order Constructs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic faith unites families, communities and the Church. The faith strengthens me and my family to face difficulties, crises, and trials. Faith is a way of life, and that life brings hope, happiness, and salvation.</td>
<td>BECs gradually shed off individualistic attitudes regarding their faith and religion (God and I) and begin to understand that these have essential relationships with their neighbors (I–Thou–We–God). Faith is personal yet ecclesial (Catechism for Filipino Catholics 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our faith should lead us to bring goodness to the poor in line with our vision as a “church of the poor.” We should reach out to those who have drifted away from the Church or those whose faith has faded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Catholic faith strengthens and encourages me to become active evangelizers of the “unchurched.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>To know Jesus means sharing with others his love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Our faith leads us to holiness, communion with one another, the Church, and Jesus Christ.</td>
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</table>

**Table 2.** For you, what is the mission of the Church?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Constructs</th>
<th>Second-Order Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Church should be concerned with and respond to social issues such as abortion, drugs, and criminalities.</td>
<td>Members of BECs are deeply aware of the social implications of their faith on a day to day living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the Church is organized, it can respond well to social issues and natural disasters. An example is a recent earthquake in the Kidapawan diocese which took countless victims. The Christian communities and government agencies immediately responded and gave them the needed assistance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church can respond satisfactorily to current social issues.</td>
<td>The Church is mission-oriented that responds to the needs of the members of the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church should be a living communion of believers and mission-oriented. It should give attention to the needs of people. As a servant leader, I voluntarily embrace a life of serving my master Jesus Christ and following his commands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>As a servant leader in the parish, I should make others aware of our Christian responsibility and obligation. This includes responding to the needs of our neighboring BECs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church is actively responding to social issues. In our diocese, we are the “UBAS” or Ugnayan ng mga Barangay At Simbahan (Partnership of the barangay and the Catholic Church) who work hard for the good of everyone.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church, through the BEC, is now more active in its mission and evangelization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church is “moving,” but the people need more catechism and evangelization.</td>
<td>The Church is a communion, agent of evangelization, and herald of peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hindi siya matapang kumpara noong una. Pero pino-promote niya ang non-violent action. Naroroon pa rin ang tibay ng paniniwala at pagdadadal sa Diyos.” (The Church is not as vocal and active against social issues as before. However, it continues to promote non-violent action. Our faith in God remains steadfast. We still believe in the power of prayer.)</td>
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</table>
Table 3. In these modern times, how can the Church fulfill its mission?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Constructs</th>
<th>Second-Order Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>As BECs:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>There should be continuous Christian education of the people through the BECs.</td>
<td>Members BECs understand that they have valued relationships with their neighbors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can be more creative during the catechesis of BEC members.</td>
<td>BECs are praxis-oriented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We must ensure that all members of the BECs will participate in the activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commit ourselves further to the activities of BECs.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue the faith formation of the BECs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I recommend that social action works such as livelihood programs be tailor-fitted for the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>New evangelization:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Church should provide more catechism.</td>
<td>The Church is an agent of evangelization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should evangelize our youth (i.e., teach them the basics of Catholic doctrine).</td>
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<tr>
<td>We can help in evangelization by becoming catechists. We have to catechize our family members, and our co-workers in the parish or even give one-on-one catechism lessons. The Church must catechize those who will receive the sacrament to know that they are disciples of Christ.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamic sacramental worship:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I think the Church must make sacramental worship more meaningful and relevant to Filipino culture.</td>
<td>BECs promote a sacramental attitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacramental worship should be done in places near the parish church. The sacrament should be brought to those who need it most—the lost and the last. We should preserve sacramental worship since it is a way to communicate with God. We believe that Jesus is present in the sacraments because he instituted them. Sacramental worship must be contextualized to the situation of Filipinos so that their everyday life is not far from worship and church celebrations. Sacramental worship should be experienced and felt by the people. Sacramental worship must have catechism or “deepened” before it is celebrated to make it more meaningful. Sacraments must be brought to the marginalized or those living in distant places.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Effective Church leadership:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a leader, I observed that catechesis is necessary for the faithful before giving them the sacraments.</td>
<td>A process of “de-clericalization” and a corresponding “lay empowerment” takes place in BECs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church leaders must go to the grassroots.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have to be fruitful pastoral workers and serve with the help of the Holy Spirit. The catechist can lead simple liturgical celebrations.</td>
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5. Discussion

5.1. Significance of Catholic Faith among the Select Bai

The latest International Survey of Catholic Women Synthesis of Synod 2021–2023 (Beattie et al. 2022) pointed out that Catholic women have a strong Catholic identity. Even when they experience frustrations and struggles, they regard their religious identity. Similarly, the select bai’s understanding of the Catholic faith is in line with the identity of the Church. Table 1 shows that their knowledge of Christ empowers them to deal with daily struggles. In addition, their faith fosters unity within their family, community, and the Church. Additionally, their faith motivates them to reach out to the unchurched or those who have drifted away from the Church and preach the Good News. The bai also acknowledge and live out a faith that is personal yet ecclesial (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines 2005). As a result, they are no longer individualistic about faith and religion and recognize their essential relationships with others (Rebustillo 2018). Identifying themselves as the “Church of the poor” and committing to “bring goodness to the poor” are two ways they participate in the new evangelization. Thus, the BECs led by the bai engender in Christians a sense of ecclesial identity that mediates divine revelation and makes it possible to respond to Jesus Christ by faith (Fisichella 2015).
5.2. The Mission of the Church According to the Select Bai

The Church is the people of God entrusted with the mission “to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (cf. Mt 5:13-16; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines 2005, para. 80, p. 1381). Table 2 shows that the “new way of being Church” aligns with Church teachings, as the select bai describe the Church as a living communion of believers participating in the mission of the Church. In light of their particular context, the bai specifies that the mission of the Church is to address the pressing needs of the people and oppose the culture of death (John Paul II 1995). In the spirit of synodality, the bai also believe that the Church can adequately address current social issues. This was supported by the Catholic Women Speak (Beattie et al. 2022) that pointed out that the majority of Catholic women view that their identity is inseparable from social justice and their mission is to reach out to the poor and the vulnerable. It is noteworthy that the BECs provide liaising services between the barangay (smallest political units in the country) and the institutional Church (i.e., Philippine Catholic Church), choose peaceful means of resolving social issues, and respond immediately to natural disasters, all of which contribute to the development of an authentic culture of life (John Paul II 1995, para. 86). Following Jesus Christ’s commands, the BECs become a people of life who develop a renewed culture of love and solidarity for the true good of society (John Paul II 1995, para. 101).

5.3. The Participation of the Select Bai and BECs in the Missio Dei

Among the bai, missionary discipleship consists of striving to communicate the truth of the Gospel effectively in a specific context (Francis 2013). Table 3 shows that women servant leaders have explained that they participate in the missio Dei in these modern times by promoting new evangelization, establishing effective Church leadership, and fostering dynamic worship. In doing so, BECs serve as authentic Christian witnesses. They understand that they have valued relationships with their neighbors and should be praxis-oriented (Rebustillo 2018). Since Christians must cultivate their relationship with one another as brothers and sisters (cf. Rom. 12:10), the select bai emphasizes catechesis, faith formation, and inclusion for all. They also call for social action projects that address the needs of their community based on their specific context.

The BECs are agents of evangelization. They celebrate their life and their togetherness through Sunday services, listening to the Gospel, and receiving the Eucharist, which in turn inspires, strengthens, and deepens their witness (Picardal 2014). When preaching the gospel, the bai aim to reach their families first, and then their neighbors. As part of their mission, they are also tasked with catechizing the youth to ensure they understand Catholic doctrine. According to Batugal (2019), there are many Filipino Catholics who are superficially sacramentalized but are never adequately catechized. This is why the bai insists that Catholics who will receive the sacraments should be informed about their Christian identity and duties.

The Catholic Church (1992, para. 1114–31) teaches that the sacraments are effective signs which enable the members of the community to live a life of grace. Additionally, a sacramental celebration is a dialogue between God’s adopted sons and daughters and their Father through Christ in the Spirit (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines 2005). The select bai expressed the importance of the sacraments for those who participate actively in the missio Dei, adding that sacramental worship must be culturally contextualized. Such a notion reflects a sacramental attitude in which human experiences are read in the light of the Catholic faith, as well as the Catholic faith interpreted in terms of ordinary life situations. Consequently, both human experiences are sacramental; they are both sacramentum and mysterion (De Mesa and Cacho 2012). Furthermore, the bai argue that marginalized people should have easier access to the sacraments. As servant leaders of BECs the bai understand the importance of encountering Christ through a community of believers. Those who are part of a small community have the greatest chance of living a life of Christian discipleship (Asis 2020).
Pope Francis envisions the Church’s mission as recovering the simplicity of the Gospels (Asis 2020, p. 141). In Evangelii Gaudium, the pontiff writes:

“I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets [. . . ]. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.” (Francis 2013, para. 49)

The servant leadership of the bai and their preferential option for the poor embodies Pope Francis’ exhortation that leaders should be attune to the needs of the people (CRS Communications 2022). The bai provide catechesis and conduct simple liturgical celebrations in their BECs which demonstrate the process of de-clericalization and lay empowerment in the new way of being Church (Rebustillo 2018). Beattie et al. (2022) shared that the majority of Catholic women support some level of reform in the Church. This includes the representation of women in the Church. Likewise, there is a high level of agreement that a less hierarchical model of the Church was needed. This means that clergy and laity must have greater collaboration and sharing of responsibility. In the BEC context, it shows that bai manifest their presence in the Church by catechizing the community members. They believe that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers women servant leaders in the Church to be effective pastoral workers.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

The survey results were taken from select Filipino Catholic servant leaders of BECs in Mindanao, so the results are not representative of all Filipino Catholic women in the Church. The author, however, believes the paper provided a theological space for reflection on the bai and the “new way of being Church” in Mindanao. In addition, it privileged and amplified the voices of some Catholics from the peripheries.

Second, some constructs in the first order are not fully described by the respondents. Notions such as “organized Church,” “movement of the Church,” and “deepening of sacramental worship” can be elaborated. Future studies can explore issues such as “How can BECs better organize themselves so that they can respond promptly and effectively to pressing social needs?” or “How can sacramental worship revitalize BECs in the modern era?”

6. Conclusions

A better understanding of contemporary ecclesiology in a predominantly Catholic nation can be gained from critically reflecting upon the lived religion of the select bai of BECs in Mindanao. The bai’s notions of faith and active participation in the missio Dei through the BEC underscore women’s indispensable contribution toward synodality and social transformation in the Church and modern society. As individuals and as servant leaders, the select bai articulate their understanding of the Catholic faith and identity as part of the Church. It also shows that they conceptualize the mission of the Church which is to follow the examples of Jesus Christ by loving humankind, especially the poor and the marginalized. Moreso, they determine their vocation as a “new way of being Church” and identify the evangelical actions needed by the Church to be in tune with the signs of the times. Finally, this paper affirms that Filipino Catholic women servant leaders realize their Christian identity and vocations within the basic ecclesial communities.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted per the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Data were collected within an accepted educational setting. More importantly, the information obtained is encoded in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.
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