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**Hearts on Fire: Mission and Discipleship of Female Catholic Christians in the Asian Context**

Author(s): Marinda Keng Fan Chan

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## Hearts On Fire:

### *Mission and Discipleship of Female Catholic Christians in the Asian Context*

**Marinda Keng Fan Chan**

*Graduate Theological Union*

*Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the crucial role of women doing missions in the Asian context. Regardless of women's contributions to the church, their efforts have often gone unrecognized in history as missiological studies often focus on men. I will describe and discuss three particular gifts female Christians bring to local missions, namely the mission of healing, the mission of hospitality, and the mission of harmony, in an effort to reclaim the centrality of women in the gospel and in global Christianity.

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“Christianity is predominantly a Woman’s Movement,” claimed Dana Robert, a professor of World Christianity at Boston University.<sup>1</sup> In her book *Christian Mission*, she argues that the majority of Christians in the world are women and thus the theological investigations of women’s missions should be examined within the history of missions. However, the field of missiology remains predominantly focused on men. Regardless of women’s contributions to the church, their efforts have often gone unrecognized in history. This is true not only in the West, where women mystics such as Theresa de Avila and Julian of Norwich went unrecognized until after their deaths, but also in the East. The contributions of female missionaries like

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 141.

Shi Meiyu (also known as Mary Stone), the first Chinese woman to obtain her medical degree in America and who began her medical mission in China in the nineteenth century, were not recognized for many years. Additionally, the work of many other Catholic women throughout Asia has long been overlooked.

This article examines the crucial role of women doing missions in the Asian context. What are the unique ways and gifts that female Catholic Christians have contributed to mission and evangelization in Asia? I will argue three particular gifts female Christians bring to local missions, namely the mission of healing, the mission of hospitality, and the mission of harmony, in an effort to reclaim the centrality of women in the gospel and global Christianity. I will utilize the documents of the Federation of Asia Bishops' Conference (FABC)<sup>2</sup>, in dialogue with feminist missiologists such as Cathy Ross and Dana Robert to unfold the feminist perspective of missions in the Asian context.

### **Mission of Healing – Rooted Realities of Asia**

The criticality of healing ministries in local missions is an important gift that women can bring to wounded hearts today. Since biblical times, women have encountered Christ through being healed and subsequently were empowered to proclaim the good news. Jesus cured a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years, laying hands on her in the Temple and saying, "Woman, you are set free of your infirmity." (Luke 13:12) Through intimate dialogue, such as the one with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus healed hearts by listening. The Samaritan woman was transformed by Jesus and went forth to proclaim the good news and evangelize, as written in John 4:39: "Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified" on his behalf. She proclaims the power of Jesus with her own voice after being healed. In the mission of healing, women as a disciple of Jesus is to follow and imitate Him in ministering, listening, serving other with a personal-oriented approach, and entering the hearts of the people so as to help them to understand their hearts intimately. The process of knowing one's heart is

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<sup>2</sup> "Nature and Functions," The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), accessed November 12, 2017, <http://www.fabc.org/about.html>.

part of the transformation process in which God's healing can strengthen people to proclaim the gospel in their own voice. Helping women by giving them voice is one of the main goals in the mission of healing.

Many Asian women continue to need healing both physically and spiritually. The stark reality of women's situations reveals the "cries and the pain of the women."<sup>3</sup> Many Asian women continue to struggle to survive in the midst of suffering due to poverty as well as physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Moreover, many are deprived of opportunities for social, educational, and political participation and advancement, remaining unrecognized for their contributions to the church and society and, in many cases, experiencing oppression in the name of religion.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the early 1990s when the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) started to address more publicly the role of women in the Church, finally establishing a Women's Desk in FABC's Office of Laity in 1995 to specifically engage the role of women in the church and society. However, in the last twenty years, only five documents were issued from the Asian level meetings from the Bishops' Institutes on Lay Apostolate (BILA): "Role of Women in Church and Society, Toward 2000" in 1995; "Discipleship of Women - A Service to Life" in 1998; "Women's God Experiences Rooted in Life" in 2001; "The Bishop: Harbinger of Hope - Bishops, Women, Gospel and Communion" in 2008; and "Making a Difference to the Reality of Women" in 2012. Clearly, the fact that only five documents have emerged over the course of more than twenty years indicates a lack of serious concern with the plight of women. FABC leaders need to listen and recognize women's voices, an act that would be the first step for the mission of healing to move from inactivity into concrete realization.

Despite the dominant hierarchal voices from the ecclesiastical top, women continue to work to see that their voices are heard from below. They put their voices out, and the persistence of women's voices brings forth the mission of healing to the different local regions in Asia. The different regional FABC meetings have gathered often to discuss the issues particular to their regions, reflecting on and issuing documents in response

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<sup>3</sup> "BILA on Women I," The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), accessed November 12, 2017, <http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/BILA%20ON%20WOMEN%20I.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to these issues, such as “Climate Change Impacts on Vulnerable Groups & Women’s Perspectives” in 2017 and “Women Living the Eucharist in South Asia” in 2010 by the FABC’s South Asian region; “Challenges to Women in the Family in the 21st Century” in 2008 from the South East Asia region, and “Discipleship of Women – Challenges of the 21st Century” in 2005 by the East Asia region. All meetings were well attended by local women from their regions.

Virginia Saldanha, the former executive secretary of the Women’s Desk and a persistent voice for women’s empowerment in the Church from India, continued her ministry of advocacy and empowerment even after her retirement. In her interview with the *National Catholic Reporter*, she stated the following:

I thought that the purpose of having a Women’s Desk in a bishops’ structure would be to help the bishops understand the problems of women so that they can carry out their pastoral ministry to women better. But since the bishops felt they had to tell me what to do and how to do it, I felt it is no use wasting my time in the structure. In the earlier years, however, I did meet with a lot of success. The women’s movement in the church in Asia was launched and grew fast. It will continue to grow even at the margins because there is a lot of awareness about women’s rights and status....The women’s group has been a powerful tool in women’s empowerment. It provides strong support for women as it creates an environment to help them to take action together...I ardently believe that women coming together locally and being in solidarity internationally can be a strong force to bring about change.<sup>5</sup>

Another persistent voice is that of Sr. Mary John Mananzan, a political and feminist activist from the Philippines who helped develop an Asian feminist theology of liberation. In a report, she lays out her hopes for the future:

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<sup>5</sup> “Voices from Women,” *National Catholic Reporter*, accessed Feb 15, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global-sisters-report/voice-women>.

Real effort is needed to try to understand each other, to have honest, even difficult, confrontation about each other's differences, to accept these differences and to purge one's own prejudices and unconscious racism or bigotry. Then we must forge a common commitment to the human race and struggle against all forms of discrimination and exclusion and engage in common efforts to bring about a more just, humane society and to save our planet from ecological disaster. Only then can we truly call each other sisters and brothers.<sup>6</sup>

Sr. Mananzan reinforces an important point. Women's voices need to be heard and recognized so as to create space for reconciliation, for support, and for action. After this condition is met, the Church can then commit to an Asian mode of missions, which commits both men and women to fight and struggle against all forms of discrimination, poverty, and marginalization. The Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), a self-initiated women's group formed by Asian female Catholic theologians, has constantly pushed for different voices to be heard. They have organized regular conferences to address social realities and have sought "to bring to consciousness that women are Church and always have been Church."<sup>7</sup> Their upcoming conference, entitled "Displacement and Disqualification: Its Surfaces and Silhouettes Catholic," will endeavor to investigate the important reality and theological challenge of migration and displacement in Asia from Catholic Asian feminist perspectives. The conference will be held on January 15-19, 2020 in Malaysia.

Cathy Ross states that although women's names and experiences have not often appeared in official documents, their engagement is clear in the letters they have written to their families, in their journals, and in their communications with others in their network.<sup>8</sup> Their work has been more

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<sup>6</sup> Mary John Mananzan, "Celebrating Diversity, Finding Solidarity," Global Sisters Report, May 29, 2014, accessed February 16, 2019, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/column/justice-matters/equality/celebrating-diversity-finding-solidarity-3616>

<sup>7</sup> "Ecclesia of Women in Asia", Ecclesia of Women in Asia, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://ecclesiaofwomen.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Cathy Ross, "'Without Faces': Women's Perspectives on Contextual Missiology," in *Putting Names with Faces*, eds. Christine Lienemann-Perrins, Atola Longkumer and Afrie Songco Joye (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 362-363.

personal, and Ross sees this as a missiology that contributes “from below; [it is] a more ordinary, a more personal, a more modest missiology.”<sup>9</sup> The FABC characterizes one of the gifts that women bring to the Church as their ability to demonstrate God’s compassion for others through personal connection: “The aptitudes and charisms of a woman enables her to participate in areas of ministry especially suited to her. Her special capacities to love and give life make her receptive, sensitive and reflective, thus equipping her for a more person-orientated ministry.”<sup>10</sup> This “person-orientated” ministry has encouraged both religious and laywomen to engage in ministry as teachers, nurses, and social workers and in other leadership roles in the community. This resonates with Dana Robert’s belief that women’s missions activities are best carried out through their “webs of human relationships.”<sup>11</sup> Such a mode of missioning is truly a gift to the Church. Indeed, in various parts of Asia, women adopt this participatory and personal approach in their mission. This includes Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, which gives comfort and dignity to dying people in India; the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, who operate two hospitals in Hong Kong working for underprivileged groups; the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who run various teenage and women centers in many Asian countries providing shelter for pregnant teens and abused women; and the Maryknoll Sisters in Macau, who run a social service facility for the deaf.

These are only a few examples of women religious orders carrying out healing missions with those in society’s margins and with the oppressed. The realities rooted in Asia call for a female mission of healing, like those women in the early community of Christ. Christ liberates and heals the pain of the women, so that they can proclaim and evangelize the good news of the Lord for themselves, and for all those dealing with the harsh realities of life.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Thao Nguyen, “A New Way of Being Church for Mission Asian Catholic Bishops and Asian Catholic Women in Dialogue: A Study of the Documents of The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC)” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2013), accessed November 12, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>11</sup> Robert, *Christian Mission*, 141.

## Mission of Hospitality – Rooted in Christ

With the reality of globalization and increasing interconnectivity, we often encounter refugees, migrant workers, and displaced people from other countries. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Asia and Pacific region has 3.5 million refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced peoples, and 1.4 million stateless peoples, with the majority of refugees being from Afghanistan and Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> As reported by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, from January to September 2017 alone, 1.3 million Filipinos left the country to seek work elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> The Philippine Statistics Agency reports that 53.7 percent of Filipino migrant workers are women who work as domestic helpers, nurses, caregivers and entertainment business.<sup>14</sup> In the UN International Migration Report 2017, 106 million international migrants out of 258 million were born in Asia.<sup>15</sup> Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle from the Philippines talks about poverty as a form of forced migration.<sup>16</sup> Yet attention to this important issue is relatively muted in Asian circles. In Asia, do local church leaders address the mission of refugees and migrant workers often enough? What is the response of FABC to the current issues in Asia regarding refugees, migration, and displacement? What is the role of the FABC in leading the local Asian churches to work on these issues? Do the local churches develop a ministry for those migrant workers? So far, an official document has not been issued at the bishopric level of the FABC to address this important global issue. Thus, a mission of hospitality that emphasizes the criticality of welcoming everyone to the table of the Lord is particularly important in the Asian reality of migrations and refugees. The goal of the

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<sup>12</sup> "Asia and the Pacific," The UN Refugee Agency, accessed February 20 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/asia-and-the-pacific.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Reyes, "Filipino Migrant Workers Continue to Suffer in Silence," *UCANews*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/filipino-migrant-workers-continue-to-suffer-in-silence/83027>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, "The UN International Migration Report 2017," *United Nations*, accessed February 20, 2019, [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017\\_Highlights.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> John L. Allen Jr., "Manila Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle: The Asian Pope Francis," *Crux*, Jan 15, 2015, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/01/15/manila-cardinal-luis-tagle-the-asian-pope-francis/>



mission of hospitality is to welcome strangers, to meet and bring Christ to where they are, and women exercise the mission of hospitality through their participatory and personally-oriented approach.

In public addresses, Pope Francis reminds us that practicing true hospitality requires listening: “With listening, a guest is welcomed as a person, with his history, his heart rich in sentiments and thoughts, so that he might feel truly that he is among family.”<sup>17</sup> He further mentions that “authentic hospitality is a profound Gospel value that nurtures love and is our greatest security against hateful acts of terrorism.”<sup>18</sup> The Pope urges the faithful to transform their communities into places of welcome, places that exist not just for survival but “to grow, flourish and bear fruit.” Cardinal Tagle, in his 2016 Christmas address, urged the faithful to make room for the poor, saying that, “Christmas is a reminder of hospitality denied by people but reversed by the merciful hospitality offered by God. I pray that our Christmas may make us more hospitable or welcoming to others, especially the poor and needy. Will we make room for them?”<sup>19</sup> Hospitality involves careful listening and making room for others. Henri Nouwen conceptualizes hospitality primarily in terms of “the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”<sup>20</sup>

These definitions of hospitality from Pope Francis, Cardinal Tagle, and Henri Nouwen resonate with the concept of mission. Mission invites people to enter the loving relationship with Christ, to welcome and create space for people and allow changes to take place.<sup>21</sup> Tagle sees “every human encounter is mission,” which coincidentally is also the emphasis of

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<sup>17</sup> Vatican Radio, “Pope Francis reflects on true hospitality,” *Catholic Independent News*, July 17, 2016, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/30527>.

<sup>18</sup> Vatican Radio, “Pope Francis reflects on true hospitality.”

<sup>19</sup> Paterno Esmaque II, “Cardinal Tagle on Christmas: Why No Hope for Those Astray?” *Rappler*, December 23, 2016, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/156434-cardinal-tagle-christmas-message-hope-astray>.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1976), 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Ross, “Creating Space: Hospitality as a Metaphor for Mission,” *ANVIL* 25, no.3 (2008): 167-176, accessed 16 November 2017, [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/25-3\\_167.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/25-3_167.pdf).

the FABC; dialogue is the modality of being a missionary in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Since Christ is not universally known in Asian contexts, the proclamation of Christ can be creatively carried out through dialogue in promoting the human community. The Asia Mission Congress in 2006 concluded with a proposal to deepen the experience of Jesus in personal and community life by “keeping the story of Jesus alive, forming community, showing compassion, befriending ‘the other,’ carrying the cross, witnessing to the living person of Jesus.” In the Scriptures, women often opened their households for missions activities in Jesus’s and Paul’s ministries. Since the beginning, female discipleship has been rooted in and inexorably connected with Christ and with hospitality. Creating space for strangers, welcoming people to the table of fellowship is a prevailing metaphor for the Kingdom of God; Jesus’s messianic banquet is for everyone, including the poor, sinners, and others. Hospitality is not just about food and opening one’s household to others, it is about welcoming all to the table of Jesus’ fellowship. The Eucharistic feature of table fellowship has an egalitarian dimension. When we eat or have a meal together, we are not strangers; rather, we create a relationship with our neighbors and with God. The dining table is the central gathering place for a family to share life experiences, to hold intimate conversation, to feel replenished and supported by each other. Most importantly in the Asian context, the dining table is a place for reinforcing the family.

Women in Asia continue to witness to Christ faithfully and to bring Christ into their daily lived experiences. All over Asia, many women are forced to leave their homes to be migrant workers in order to be the breadwinners for their children and families. Christians listen compassionately to the anguish of women sex workers, witness the exploitation of women laborers, share the brokenness of women in distress, and celebrate solidarity with women from non-Christian faiths.<sup>23</sup> This cross-cultural transmission of faith in the service of welcoming and hospitality brings forth evangelization. To invoke certain examples, the Maryknoll Sisters in Japan opened a Philippine Migrant Workers Center to

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<sup>22</sup> “Cardinal Tagle: ‘Every Human Encounter is a Possible Mission’,” *SouthWorld*, December 2017, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.southworld.net/cardinal-tagle-every-human-encounter-is-a-possible-mission/>

<sup>23</sup> FABC, “BILA on Women I.”

minister to migrant women since 2002.<sup>24</sup> Migrant workers are often victims of domestic abuse. Some are forced to overstay their visas, making them easy targets by agents who force many of them into prostitution.<sup>25</sup> In India, religious Catholic women are the backbone of the prison ministry, making regular visits to prisons, meeting with the families of the prisoners, and arranging for the rehabilitation of those who are released and reuniting with their own families.<sup>26</sup> In Macau, the religious sisters of the Missionaries of Charity distribute lunch or dinner boxes regularly to the homeless, visiting families in the poorest areas of the city and practicing a ministry of accompaniment in sharing a meal together. Caritas Macau also runs a food bank to distribute food to the 2,200 elderly and low-income families; most of the volunteers are women.<sup>27</sup>

According to Cathy Ross, “women’s missiology is based on a real resistance to a male-dominated mission practice that can emphasize power, dominating control.”<sup>28</sup> Women’s forms of hospitality arise from their participatory and personally-oriented approach to meeting needs where they see them. Women operate through the web of human relationships, which enables them to feed strangers and feast with them at the table creating space where people can listen and learn from each other.

## **Mission of Harmony—Rooted in Community**

Asia embraces rich and diverse faith traditions; 85% of the entire world’s non-Christians live there.<sup>29</sup> In response to the multi faith phenomena in

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<sup>24</sup> The centre is named Kalakasan Migrant Women Empowerment Center situated in Kanagawa, Japan. It is a non-governmental organization dedicated to the empowerment of migrant women and their children. Read more on <http://kalakasan.jp>.

<sup>25</sup> BILA on Women II, “Summary of Country Reports on the Status of Women,” in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, ed. Virginia Saldanha (Bangalore, India: Claretian Publications, 2007), 105.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Mattew, “Women Religious Strengthen Prison Ministry India to Help Rehabilitate Inmates,” *Global Sisters Report*, May 15, 2017, accessed November 16, 2017, <http://globalsistersreport.org/news/ministry/women-religious-strengthen-prison-ministry-india-help-rehabilitate-inmates-46641>.

<sup>27</sup> “Caritas Macau,” Caritas Asia, accessed November 17, 2017, <http://caritas.asia/index.php/where-we-are/east-asia-sub-region/caritas-macau>.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, “Without Faces,” 377.

<sup>29</sup> James H Kroeger, *Asia’s Dynamic Local Churches: Serving Dialogue and Mission* (Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, 2014), 40.

Asia, the FABC's missiology emphasizes dialogue. The goal of the mission of harmony is to maintain harmony through dialogue with people of different faith. The FABC Plenary Assembly states, "The Asian bishops have spoken of evangelization in Asia as involving a threefold dialogue with the poor, the cultures and the religions of Asia."<sup>30</sup> Dialogue and deeds have to be carried out with harmony, which is crucial in the interreligious context. In Confucian philosophies, harmony is a philosophical and cosmological concept in which order in the world has to be achieved through harmonization.<sup>31</sup> Shi Bo, a pre-Confucian scholar-minister from the Western Zhou period (1066-771 BCE) viewed harmony as follows:

Harmony (*he*) is indeed productive of things. But sameness does not advance growth. Smoothing one thing with another is called harmony. For this reason things come together and flourish. If one uses the same thing to complement the same thing, it is a dead end and will become wasted.<sup>32</sup>

According to Shi Bo, harmony enables society to prosper. Contemporary Confucian scholar Chenyang Li understands Confucian harmony as an ethical notion that guides human actions. Always relational and contextual, it does not imply sameness. Its requirement, as Li mentions, "places a constraint on each party in interaction and in the meantime provides a context for each party to have optimal space to flourish."<sup>33</sup> Even though maintaining harmony is important in many Asian contexts, the realities of significant disharmony, brought about by humankind through the economic exploitation of the poor, oppressive forms of government and social control, religious, cultural and communal conflicts, ecological and environmental crises, and the abuse of science and technology, all threaten, weaken, and diminish the life of Asians.<sup>34</sup> Adding salt to the

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<sup>30</sup> FABC, "Evangelization in Modern Day in Asia," in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. I, 25-81.

<sup>31</sup> Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (October 2006): 583-603.

<sup>32</sup> Shi Bo in Guoyu "Zhengyu" quoted in Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (October 2006): 584.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 589.

<sup>34</sup> Read more on FABC, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, 112-119.

wound is the fact that women are often disproportionately the victims of this disharmony. In Asian countries like India, the powerlessness of women is the result of patriarchal domination that divides them into class, race and caste.<sup>35</sup>

The first step to achieving societal harmony is to be aware of the long-lasting forces of patriarchal domination, and to be committed to acts that reclaim space for women. Women, as represented by the *yin* force that governs all nature, need to obtain their space before they can optimize their space as a harmonious partner to the *yang* of men, so as to allow each party to have space to flourish. This insight is important because it points to the fact that both men and women must be involved in the change in thinking of sharing spaces together. Mananza is right in understanding that focusing only on women's issues cannot uproot all the problems women face in their societies. She writes the following:

It is obvious that the emerging Asian women's spirituality longs for freedom from exploitation - a free society for themselves as well as for the men and the children. The liberation framework of Asian women includes, and is included in the overall people's movement to be free. It brings a qualitatively different vision and interpersonal relationship from the traditional male way of constructing communities.<sup>36</sup>

Achieving freedom both for men and women is an essential step to making the mission of harmony successful – harmony between men and women, between religious traditions, between cultures, and between marginalized people and people in power within society. The FABC sees the urgent situations of conflicts and disharmonies and has made efforts to search for a Christian way of reading and restoring these broken realities. The emphasis is placed on formulating an approach from outside perspectives, “by those living and experiencing these conflicts; and also situations calling

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<sup>35</sup> Sr. Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Park, “Emerging Asian Spirituality,” *Women in Action* 3, (1996): 13-18, accessed February 20, 2019, [http://www.isiswomen.org/phocadownload/print/isispub/wia/wia1996-3/WIA19963\\_02EmergingSpirituality.pdf](http://www.isiswomen.org/phocadownload/print/isispub/wia/wia1996-3/WIA19963_02EmergingSpirituality.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Mananzan and Park, “Emerging Asian Spirituality.”

for a reading and listening to the message God is giving through those realities.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite the written support in the FABC documents, I must ask, what practical actions can be taken to achieve this harmony? Many Asian women have become powerful sources for constructing a theology of harmony in Asian contexts. East Asian women from the Women’s Desk have responded affirmatively to the call of women’s discipleship, concluding their first meeting on “Discipleship of Women: Challenges of the 21st Century” in 2005 in Hong Kong with some concrete suggestions and recommendations: (1) to create a space in parishes for women to come together in sisterhood for reflection, mutual help and support; (2) to set up support groups for victims of domestic violence and work for its prevention; (3) to enable women to raise awareness about being caught up within traditional cultural roles; (4) to foster the concept of family and Church as a community of love in which man and woman are equal partners; (5) to recognize the gifts of women in the Church and facilitate their sharing in the decision-making process; and (6) to foster dialogue and communication between different cultures, religions, and peoples at different levels so that isolation is overcome and participation is enhanced.<sup>38</sup>

Since the time when these goals were set forth, Christian women continue to dialogue among themselves and often engage in dialogue with the poor and other religions through everyday interactions with their families members, with neighbors of other faiths, through markets, work places, and through collaboration for the common goods.<sup>39</sup> In the Philippines, religious women have a central role in reaching out to the Muslim community by providing child care service, and Vietnamese religious women collaborate with the Buddhists to take care of homeless children.<sup>40</sup> In 2018, Macau opened the first low cost community clinic for

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>38</sup> FABC Office of Laity and Family -Women’s Desk, “Discipleship of Women- Challenges of the 21st Century,” The FABC, accessed February 20, 2019, <http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/EAMOW%20I.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Thao Nguyen, “A New Way of Being Church,” 155.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

migrant workers in Macau, including Filipinos, Indonesians, Vietnamese of different faiths, many of whom are women. In Pope Francis' recent address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, he highlighted the following: "Woman, possessing special characteristics, can offer an important contribution to dialogue with her ability to listen, to welcome and to generously open herself to others."<sup>41</sup> Francis affirms that "The contribution of women is not limited to 'feminine' arguments or to encounters of only women," adding that dialogue "is a path that man and woman must accomplish together."<sup>42</sup>

Throughout history, dialogue between cultures, religions, and everyday people has been a key to solving problems and resolving differences. Dana Roberts suggests Christian missions has long been a cross-cultural phenomenon throughout history in the formation of Christianity as a world religion.<sup>43</sup> The FABC accentuates the importance of dialogue as the mode of missions in Asia. Once again, women's participatory and personal oriented approaches contribute to fruitful dialogue throughout their daily interaction with people of different faiths and religious tradition. Dialogue is an essential tool in the mission of harmony that creates space for both women and men to reflect their day to day experiences.

## Conclusion

To reclaim the centrality of women's mission, first, their voices have to be heard. Second, the contribution of women's participatory and personally-oriented approach to alleviating suffering must be recognized and validated as a gift to the Church in Asia. In the above discussion of the missions of healing, hospitality and harmony, Christian women have continued to engage their voices through active participation in the Church's ministry, where they regularly voice their concerns for the Church. They have organized conferences, produced important publications, and

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<sup>41</sup> "Pope Francis: central role of women interfaith dialogue," Vatican Radio, September 6, 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://stjoerayne.org/2017/06/09/pope-francis-central-role-of-women-interfaith-dialogue/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Robert, *Christian Mission*, 2.

actively participated in social services and actions on behalf of oppressed and marginalized peoples. Organizations, such as the Ecclesia of Women and self-initiated groups from Asia female Catholic theologians, hold regular meetings and conferences and have become sustained important voices calling for subjectivity among Asian Catholic theologians. As Korean feminist theologian Sun Ai Lee Park says, "Asian women in mission go along with the signs of the time."<sup>44</sup> For example, in response to the call of Pope Francis to "Care for Our Common Home" in *Laudato Si*, women have responded by being on the frontlines to that engagement, often in response to the impacts of climate change that disproportionately affect the poor.<sup>45</sup> For example, the effects of global warming and climate change are hard realities of life in Asia. According to CNN, in 2017 alone, 137 million people were put at risk by the devastation caused by natural disasters in Asian countries.<sup>46</sup> When Typhoon Mora hit Bangladesh in May 2017, more than 1,200 people were killed across India and Bangladesh, and living conditions for more than forty-one million people were seriously affected. Rising waters in July 2017 across the Himalayas in South China displaced over twelve million people. In response to these disasters, women Christians from South Asia gathered together in the regional conference, "Climate Change Impact on Vulnerable Groups and Women's Perspectives," organized by the FABC Office of Laity & Family and the Women's Desk.<sup>47</sup> Participants gave voice to the negative consequences of climate change and unpredictable weather. Christian women project their voices through the mission of healing, hospitality and harmony, where in

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<sup>44</sup> Sun Ai Lee Park, "Asian Women in Mission," *International Review of Mission* 81, no. 322 (April 1992), 280.

<sup>45</sup> FABC, "Report on Women and the Impact of Climate Change," FABC, March 7-11, accessed November 12, 2017, [http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/FABC%20OLF%20Women%20and%20CC%20Battambang\\_March\\_2016REPORT.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/FABC%20OLF%20Women%20and%20CC%20Battambang_March_2016REPORT.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Ben Westcott and Steve George, "Asia Under Water: How 137 Million People's Lives Are Being Put At Risk," *CNN*, Aug. 30, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/24/asia/climate-change-floods-asia/index.html>.

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<sup>47</sup> FABC, "Climate Change impact on Vulnerable Groups and Women's Perspectives," FABC, January 17-19, 2017, [http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/FABC%20OLF%20Women%20and%20FABC%20CC%20Desk%20Women%20and%20CC%20Mumbai\\_Jan%202017\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/FABC%20OLF%20Women%20and%20FABC%20CC%20Desk%20Women%20and%20CC%20Mumbai_Jan%202017_REPORT.pdf).



each aspect, they see, reflect and act. Women bond together to have missional activities operating outside the governance of the Church, and they practice their faith and mission through concrete actions and activities.

According to Paul Kollman, the term “mission” came rather late in the sixteenth century as a means to describe Christian evangelization in relation to the early Jesuits engaging in evangelization in other countries.<sup>48</sup> However, women were engaging in what are now called “mission activities” long before the term was coined. Through the mission of healing, hospitality, and harmony, women’s participatory and personally-orientated approach has reenacted discipleship since the time of Jesus. In the Gospels, women such as Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the Samaritan Woman were in “mission” with Jesus, the Apostles, and the early Church community. Pope St. John Paul II emphasized the equal dignity of woman and men. The biological capacity of bearing life fosters women’s sensitivities and capacities to care and love. In his Angelus message on July 23, 1995, he talked about the important role of women in society:

It is a “sign of the times” that woman’s role is increasingly recognized, not only in the family circle, but also in the wider context of all social activities. Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. Situations where women are prevented from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust, not only to women themselves but to society as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

Women’s roles are not just confined to their homes; they can contribute meaningfully both to society and the church through their participation in the most diverse professional disciplines and ecclesial leadership roles. Women’s special sensitivity and empathy for others

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Kollman, “At the Origins of the Mission and Missiology: A Study in the Dynamics of Religious Language,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 2011): 425.

<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, *Society and Church Need Genius of Women* [Angelus Message], *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 23, 1995, sec 1, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP95723B.htm>.

promote and nourish the growth and development of the whole human person for themselves, for their families, and for those who work with them. Their participatory and personally-oriented approach are unique gifts that women bring to the Church in Asia.

The existing oppression, injustice, deprivation of women's rights, dignity and injustice is what the FABC calls being "out of harmony." Through the mission of healing, hospitality, and harmony, women contribute to the restoration of harmony within the Asian context. In contrast to the stereotype of Asian women as gentle, submissive, and underrepresented, women mentioned in this paper are strong, assertive, and eulogized. The FABC stresses that "dialogue is our mode of mission in Asia." Nowadays, through all the dialogue done by female Christians in Asia, a new vision of a feminine ecclesial role can take root and grow in the Church. Asian Christian women continue to utilize their gifts and creativity to uplift those who live in oppressive and unjust realities. They faithfully follow Christ as their center of ministry. When women walk on the road to Emmaus, they dare to turn to those who are walking with and beside them — listening to their burning hearts and recognizing that Jesus is with them.

*Marinda Keng Fan Chan is a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She is a 2018 Newhall Teaching Fellow and Program Coordinator at the GTU's Asia Project. She received an MA in pastoral theology from Loyola Marymount University and an MSW from the University of Michigan. Her primary research interests include religious practices in engaging the material cultures and every day lived experiences of the faithful.*

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