

# **The gift of faith: Tracing the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines through the transformative experiences of the BEC lay leaders.**

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## **Abstract**

The Philippine Church commemorates in a year-long (April 2021 – April 2022) celebration the 500 years of Christianity in the country. The Filipino Catholics and communities gathered to joyfully celebrate the event which marks the first hearing of the good news about Christ some hundred years ago by the foreign Catholic missionaries. Alongside the colonization of the Spaniards, which comes with complex issues and controversies, one remains significant and meaningful on the other side of their arrival- the Christian Faith! Today, this same mission of evangelization of the first Catholic missionaries in the country had been continued specifically in the local activities of the Church through the Basic Ecclesial Communities or the BEC movements all over the country. This is a case of qualitative study exploring the concept of faith of the lay leaders of Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) in Francisco de Borja Chapel, in Barangay Sta. Fe Caraga Davao Oriental. The study was conducted through an in-depth interview and dissemination of research questionnaire to the selected BEC lay leaders who were able to respond actively. In the end, the result of our thematic analysis, which was used to utilize in discovering the different emerging and significant themes of the gathered data, narrates for us the core meaning of the gift of faith for the BEC lay leaders: (1) faith that centers on Christ, (2) it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, (3) faith makes a person

open to salvation, (4) faith as a gift means a blessing from God, and (5) faith makes them victorious over the trials of life. Moreover, the transforming effect of faith in the utterance of the BEC lay leaders reflects in the consciousness of the researchers the vision and objectives of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991): (1) participation, (2) responsive, (3) service, and (4) becoming truly Christian. These core themes of the transforming effect of faith on the BEC lay leaders reflect the reason for the Philippines to continue cultivating and nourishing the Christian mission in realizing the Kingdom of God here on earth.

**Keywords:** faith, catholic lay leaders, basic ecclesial community, Kingdom of God, 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines

## **Background of the study**

The 500 years of Catholicism in the country were celebrated last year with the theme “Gifted to give.” According to Gaspar (NY), the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences in the Philippines made the preparation for this grand 500 anniversary of the introduction of Christianity to the Philippines since 2012. As part of the preparation, several themes were proposed, and had been materialized already, like in 2017 with the theme or focus on “Parish – Communion of Communities”. Moreover, according to Gaspar, these preparations and celebrations had put the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in the highlight just like how it had taken an important spotlight in the Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991.

The central theme in the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines focuses on ‘gift’ and ‘charity’. Hence, this study explored the concept of faith as gift, particularly in recognizing its impact on the lives of the BEC lay-leaders of San Salvador del Mundo Parish in Caraga Davao Oriental. Caraga is a having a population of 40,379 (2015 census) and canonically is under the Diocese of Mati, which was part of the Prelature of Tagum in the past, when the movement of BEC started. The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC), or popularly known as Basic Christian Communities (BCC) way back then especially in Mindanao, started its roots in the prelature of Tagum- “that gave birth to the first BECs” in the Philippines (Gaspar, NY). Gaspar elaborated this BEC movement saying that the distinct religious practices of Catholic, by putting up chapels in honor of their patron saint in their village) in their hometown was brought about when they settled anew in the land of Mindanao. However, the first organized structuring of this BCCs was later started by the Maryknoll missionaries. “Thus, the first model of BCCs were chapel based” (Gaspar, NY).

“Today, 8 in 10 Filipinos profess Catholicism as their faith. After Brazil and Mexico, the Philippines boasts the third largest number of Catholics, followed by the United States” (Manalo, 2021). The Philippines had been “Christianized” for some centuries, and this brings both pride and challenging mission to the nation. The ‘gift of faith’ to Filipinos had somehow transform the social and cultural dimension of the country but it entails a commitment to the process of evangelization of being the ‘instrument of redemptive love’. This means, as Filipino-Catholics, we are joining the Church in its salvific action of bringing or realizing the Kingdom of God here on earth. However, these things are bringing more challenges to the Catholic BEC Lay-leaders in living the call of discipleship, in making

Christ known and loved, and in extending the mission of the Church to all. Hence, witnessing faith in Jesus in the Asian context, according to Pope Francis, by Archbishop Valles, means to show the joy of believing (Gomez, 2021). This does not come so easily.

Thus, from these challenges, perspectives, and teachings of the Church, this study described and explored the faith-experienced of the BEC (Basic Ecclesial Community) lay-leaders, as a way of participating in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church in realizing the Kingdom of God (KoG). Fulfilling this task, the study utilized the qualitative-thematic approach in analyzing the stories and life changing events of the BEC leaders. Toward the end, the study discovered how the BEC lay-leaders were able to see 'faith' as gift, the way how they articulated this gift of faith in their designated ministry, and the transforming effects of faith in participating their vocation as BEC lay leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The proponents of this researchers explored the main question: *How Faith is seen as gift in the transformation of the lives of the BEC lay-leaders and as a way of realizing the Kingdom of God?*

### ***Statement of Specific Objects***

More specifically, in this study, the researchers stipulated these objectives:

1. Describe the concept and experience of faith as gift among the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) lay-leaders, specifically the *Pangulo sa Katilingban (PSK)*, *Pangulo sa Liturhiya (PSL)*, and some selected catechists.
2. Identify the elements that comprise the utterance of the 'gifts of faith' and analyzed the significant themes in relation to the transformation of the lives of BEC lay leaders toward the realization of the Kingdom of God.
3. Contribute concretely toward the understanding of faith as gift and integrating these themes into the continuing evangelization and mission of the Catholic Church.

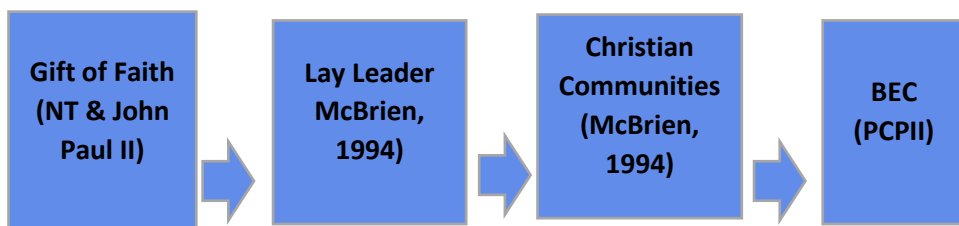
## Conceptual Model and Operational Framework

Faith is a gift. It is an accent of one's mind and heart into the Divine or God. An important component of faith is trust or trusting faith- a characteristic of believing the Divine or God in the midst of uncertainties and difficulties of life. Pope John Paul II (JPII), in his Apostolic Journey to the Philippines dated January 14, 1995, addressing the Episcopal Conference, said that "the Church's pilgrimage to the Kingdom passes through the world which she strives to serve. In order to be God's instrument of redemptive love amidst the social crises of our day, the Church must be a convincing sign of her Lord, who 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' (Phil. 2:7)". 'To be a convincing sign of the Lord,' the lay-faithful partakes in this sacred journey by participating in the social and evangelizing mission of the Church. This mission is carried through by the lay-faithful as the fruit of faith. This faith of the lay-faithful, in the Philippines, is shared by the Church in her mission into past to this country. Today, the faith, that is being shared, becomes the beacon of hope for the Church to continue its mission in propagating still the Christian faith.

In this sense, following the above ideas and thoughts, the proponents of this study were able to design this conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to create or give a bird's eye view of the concepts used in the paper particularly in understanding faith from the biblical perspective and the writings of John Paul II. Moreover, the understating of the role of a lay leader in the Christian community was elaborated using McBrien's concepts. And lastly, in contextualizing these thoughts, the documents of the Plenary Councils of the Philippines were also utilized.

### *Figure 1.*

*Conceptual Framework: Gift of Faith, Lay Leaders and BEC*



In the New Testament (in the synoptic gospels), faith is defined as an act, and is "directed to God the Father and Jesus himself. Faith is, first of all, trust in God (Mark 5:34,36; 9:23; 11:22-23; Luke 17:6), but it is also directed toward Jesus, i.e., it is the acceptance of Jesus as the one he claimed himself to be (Mark 8:27-30,38)" (McBrien, 1994, p. 27). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) speaks of faith as both 'grace' (CCC#153) and 'human act' (CCC#154). Faith as grace is "a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him" (CCC#154). And faith, as human act, tells that "In human relations it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other persons tell us about themselves and their intentions, or to trust their promises (for example, when a man and a woman marry) to share a communion of life with one another" (CCC#154).

The Christian communities exist to participate in bringing all creatures and creation to the Kingdom of God. Our Christian faith, according to McBrien (1994), is that gift of God by which we freely accepted God's self-communication in Christ" (p. 19). As defined, "the Church is the whole body, or congregation, of persons who are called by God the Father to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus, the Son, in word, in sacrament, in witness, and service, and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to collaborate with Jesus' historic mission for the sake of the Kingdom of God" (McBrien, 1994, p. 722). The gift of faith, then, enables us to participate in the mission of Christ in our participation in the mission of the Church. There are different ways and means of involving ourselves, as Christians, in the mission of the Church. While others are serving the Church as ordained ministry, religious nuns and brother, a great majority are serving as lay missionaries and evangelizers. This aspect of service of the Church is called vocation. In the Philippines, there is a great gap between the proportion of ordained ministers (including the professed religious persons) with the lay people (those who are not ordained or professed religious). Hence, a great number of lay-persons are filling-in this gap by serving as extra-ordinary ministers. In Mindanao, they are known as Pangulo sa liturhiya (PSL), they are the one responsible, in the absence of the Priest, for facilitating the Liturhiya sa Pag-ampo (or the liturgy of the word). Some of these Catholic Lay-leaders are serving also as Pangulo sa Katilingban (PSK) and some are serving as lay-catechists. The lay catechists are also trained in the basic of Theology, a "critical reflection on faith" (McBrien, 1994, p. 20).

The participation of lay leaders in the evangelizing mission of the Church is crucial in making the presence of Christ and the services of the

Church available to the community, especially those areas that can hardly be reached by the ordained and the professed-religious. Though in urban setting, due to the scarcity of priests, lay-leaders are becoming the common missionaries, and they are highly visible in every worship or religious activities of the Church, as acolytes, lectors, extra-ordinary ministers of communion, evangelizers, and many other roles. This reality in the Church, especially in the Philippines, helps ignite the lively presence of the Church and it keeps the faith of every Catholic-members alive. The faith of the lay-people, especially the leaders, contributes to materializing the major outcomes of faith- that is worship (sacramental life) and moral behavior (McBrien, 1994, p. 20). And so, this illustrates that for the lay leaders, their presence and participation in the mission of the Church generates, through their faith, an expected, not only an active participation in liturgy, but in their moral action or moral behavior. This is the transforming presence of faith that this study also aims to find out. As stated by McBrien. “The believer is a doer” (McBrien, 1994, p. 20). And he continues in saying, “the believer is engaged in a lifelong process of learning how to act in accordance with the faith that has been proclaimed and received. That learning process is known as discipleship” (McBrien, 1994, p. 20). The lay leaders of the Basic Ecclesial Communities are Christian disciples. As disciples, lay-leaders becomes the visible presence of Christ in the Basic Ecclesial Communities. “Faith is the acceptance of the message of the Gospel (Acts of the Apostles 8:13-14), and the ‘believers’ are those who accept the preaching, and this belief is centered on Jesus as the Risen Lord (5:14; 9:24; 11-17; 15:11)” (McBrien, 1994, p. 27). Hence, “the Church must be a community marked by faith, hope, love, freedom, and truthfulness, that is, by authentic discipleship, not only in its official proclamations but in its lifestyle as well” (McBrien, 1994, p. 727).

In the participation of the lay leaders in the mission of the Church, they take part in this sacred duty of realizing the kingdom of God. “The mission of the Church is focused, as is Jesus’ mission, on the *Kingdom of God*. By the *Kingdom of God* is meant the *redemptive presence of God actualized through the power of God’s renewing and reconciling Spirit*” (McBrien, 1994, p. 724). Moreover, this describes that the Church “is a community of *faith* in the significance of what has already happened in and through Jesus Christ; it is a community of *love* as an expression of the effects of that Christ-event; and it is a community of *hope* in the power of the God of Jesus Christ to re-create all things anew in Christ and the Holy Spirit” (McBrien, 1994, p. 726).

In this time of COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis I, last 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, speaks to the general audience about the healing of the world. In his statement he says:

*The response to the pandemic is therefore dual. On the one hand, it is essential to find a cure for this small but terrible virus, which has brought the whole world to its knees. On the other hand, we must also cure a larger virus, that of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalisation, and the lack of protection for the weakest. In this dual response for healing there is a choice that, according to the Gospel, cannot be lacking: the preferential option for the poor (see Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium [EG], 195).*

This statement tells us that our faith, the faith of the lay-faithful needs to bring the responses of the Church into our communities especially in addressing social inequalities and injustices. All our moral duties and obligations are guided by the light of our Christian faith. This is not just the first time that the Hierarchy of the Church calls on everyone to respond to the needs of the world. Why is this so? It is because we cannot separate our 'love for God' from our 'love for neighbor.' Moreover, one of his homilies, Pope Francis I, mentions that the COVID-19 pandemic is a social crisis (2nd May 2020). And the Pope recalls one important moment in the gospel story when Peter made the first confession of faith: "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God," and on same story, Peter added to this confession saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:66-68). Currently, we are called to remain steadfast in our faith, to fix our eyes to Jesus. In line with this Christian duty, Pope Benedict XVI, in the Muto Proprio "On the Service to Charity," which intended "to provide an organic legislative framework for the better overall ordering of the various organized ecclesial forms of the service of charity," states (in Art. 1) that "The faithful have the right to join in associations and to establish agencies to carry out specific charitable services, especially on behalf of the poor and suffering" (Apostolic Letter, Motu Proprio, 2012).

Thus, our Christian Faith, does not only expect us to worship God every Sunday but also it urges us to participate in the affairs of the world and to transform the world by our faith.

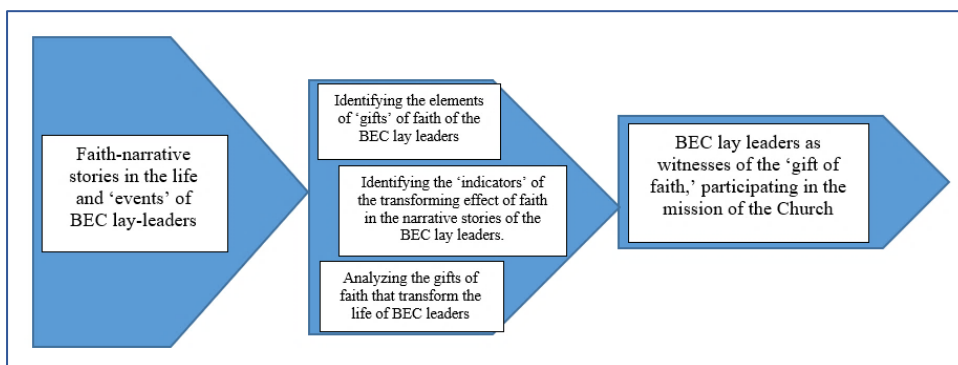


## *Operational Framework*

This study was conducted following a qualitative research approach. Hence, the illustration below (Figure 2) guided the whole process of the study:

**Figure 2.**

*Operational Framework of the Study.*



An initial assessment of this study was made by identifying the salient points of Pope John Paul II's exhortation address to the Episcopal Conference on his Journey to the Philippines on January 14, 1995, coupled with the important elements identified by the Compendium of the Social doctrine of the Church on lay apostolate and the objectives of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991). These documents served as guide in identifying in the faith-narrative stories and responses of our selected participants the indicators of faith as gift as well as the elements of identifying the factors leading to the realization of the Kingdom of God in participating in the missionary work of the Church as BEC lay leaders. In our attempt to accomplish the answer to our research problem, the operational framework (*see* Figure 2) displays the different stages of executing the study. The first stage deals with the gathering of data from the narrative-statements and responses of the participants. The data was gathered using video recording and note taking. Some responses were gathered by way of collecting the questionnaire that was given some months ahead especially for participants who are situated in remote areas. The data comprises the relevant faith-stories and the different 'BEC-related-events' that help the participants in articulating the 'gift of faith' and the

‘transforming effect of faith’ in participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church currently. The second stage is the analysis of the gathered data, by way of establishing the important elements from the uttered and written statements, identifying significant themes, and selecting the core theme while keeping the ideas and thoughts closer to the meaning and perspective of the participants. The last stage is crafting the final reflection after identifying, describing, and reflecting the gathered themes and applying the processes of narrative analysis.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Design***

This is a case study on the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) under the lay leaders of San Francisco de Borja Chapel of Barangay Santa Fe, Caraga, Davao Oriental. In this study, the researchers used the descriptive-qualitative design to determine the importance of faith as gift from the narrative stories of the BEC lay leaders. Through an actual interview or an in-depth interview, the narratives of the co-researchers and participant of the study were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using the thematic approach. “Narrative research is a term that subsumes a group of approaches that in turn rely on the written or spoken words or visual representation of individuals. These approaches typically focus on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Moreover, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) added, by saying that this method is defined as “a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). Furthermore, Esin (2011) speaks of “narratives” as “powerful forms of giving meaning to experience” (p. 93). In narrative analysis, Esim adds, it “considers how the narrator, the leading character of the told story, makes meaning of her/his life and/or experiences while telling their story” (p. 97). With the interest to discover and know fully the experiences of the selected participants, and interview questionnaire was also distributed especially to those who are situated in areas that can hardly be reached. The responses were collected, transcribed (rough translation is provided), and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. By using the thematic analysis or approach, it allows and guides us in seeing systematically the information gathered through coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### ***Data Gathering Procedure***

Part of the preparation of the study was forwarding our communication materials, including the letter to the bishop, and the letter of request for the concerned individuals who will be participating in the study. The selected participants were chosen using the following criteria: (1) a BEC lay-leader of San Salvador del Mundo Parish in Caraga Davao Oriental (PSK, PSL, or Catechist); (2) must be 18 years old and above, and (3) a minimum of 3-year of service in the Basic Ecclesial Community. A number of 10–15 was projected to participate in this study from the start. However, with the challenges and difficulties brought about by COVID-19, only 3 persons were able to participate in the in-depth interview, and 7 persons responded remotely through the interview questionnaire all were from San Francisco de Borja Chapel. The data privacy act was reviewed and considered afterwards. The participants were informed of the purpose, goals, and objectives of the study. A separate page of research consent was provided, and our co-researchers were numerically identified to conceal their identity though there was no harm projected in this study. Hence, the Ethical research approach was also applied considering that human persons were our means to gather the data. Nonetheless, this study was guided and approved by the Ethics Review Board of San Beda University.

### ***Data Collection Plan***

Two modes or forms were initiated in gathering the data. First, a one-on-one interview with a semi structured questionnaire including prompts was utilized (in consideration the health standard protocol of the area or place where we are conducting the study). The process of doing qualitative-interviewing was guided by Schostak (2006) who says that an “interview can be seen as a project having as its aim the exploration of the projects – real, potential, imagined – held by others. In this way, the interview is the means to educate (that is, draw out), elucidate and evaluate what is at stake and also to elaborate and effect projects of one’s own making” (p. 48). The purpose of this interview was fully to involve the participants in sharing his/her experience in the BEC with the guidance of the questionnaire. Beforehand, the researchers reached out to the proper office in the diocese, requesting formally the possibility of conducting this study (interviewing) in the diocese. As the researchers proceeded with the data gathering, the selection of the participants was done through recommendations. In the process of doing the interview, it lasted for about 40 to 60 minutes. The interview was recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The second means of gathering the data was by sending an interview questionnaire to the selected participants (especially for those who cannot be visited because of their situation or location). In the interview-questionnaire, it started with a broad question – “*Can you please tell me about your BEC experience, how did you start your involvement, and why you remain active still in serving the BEC?*” – and this was followed by more specific questions on the topic of faith, faith activities and on how it helps them become better Christians (see Table 1 for the guide questions). Questions on the guide questionnaire was translated also in the vernacular (Mandaya or Cebuano). The responses or data that was written or spoken in Mandaya were immediately transcribed and translated into Cebuano and English.

**Table 1.**

*Research questions and questionnaire both for interview and written narratives.*

Questions	Prompts
<b><i>Broad Question:</i></b> “Can you please tell me about your BEC experience, how did you start your involvement, and why you remain active still in serving the BEC?”	
<b>How do you consider faith as gift?</b>	Why do you think that the Christian faith is a gift? Can you please elaborate it more for me?
<b>How do you experience these ‘gifts of faith’?</b>	Does it help you in changing your life? In what specific ways? At this time of the pandemic, how did you experience or express the gift of faith?
<b>What will, in return, these ‘gifts of faith’ contribute to the mission of the Church particularly at the BEC level?</b>	In the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines, what do you think are that matters the most among these ‘gifts of faith’ in continuing to serve God and in participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church especially in realizing God’s Kingdom here in our country?

### ***Data Analysis***

The gathered data was analyzed using the qualitative-narrative analysis and thematic approach. Like other qualitative studies, this qualitative-narrative analysis is materialized by looking into common

themes and insights from the interview and understanding the meaning of it coming from the perspective of the interviewee. The (oral) interview was written or transcribed, and the principles of identifying the 'core' elements in relation to the theme, with certain emphasis on the use of words that reflect the essential value from the story of the narrator, was considered. "Themes are not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (Note, Seminar on Qualitative Research 2019 by the Social Science Department of the University of the Philippines).

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on the gathered data, both from those who responded using the interview questionnaire and those who participated in the in-depth interview, the following statements (*see* Table 2, Column 1) were identified and selected as part of the factors or reasons in the involvement of lay leaders in their respective BEC. A rough translation in English was provided to better understand the statements (*see* Table 2 below). A sub-heading was incorporated in the statements to identify the salient points in the uttered and written words. These sub-headings were considered as initial themes describing the meaning and value of the uttered statements of the participants of the study. The second column (*see* Table 2) presents the significant statement in the perception of faith as gift. A rough translation is also provided for statements uttered and written in the vernacular. A sub-heading was also incorporated to initially identify and described the 'statements of faith as gift' from the participants of the study. These sub-headings were considered as sub themes also. Hence, these themes were categorized to formulate and identify the core themes from the data.

**Table 2.**

*Selected significant statements and identified themes in the BEC experience and on Faith as gift.*

<b>Significant Statements on BEC experience.</b>	<b>Statement on Faith as Gift</b>
<p><b>Childhood and Service experience growing in goodness and prayer.</b>  <i>Ang akong pag pang alagad kabahin na kini sa akong pagkabata. Hungtod karon nga naminyo na ako ug nakabat-on ug pamilya, pamilya nga dili nato maengon nga perpekto kini apan igongoni-ana naming-kamot mi nga molambo sa ma ayong buhat gi ibunan ug pag-ampo sa atong Ginoo.</i>  <u>Rough Translation:</u> My involvement in the BEC is part of my childhood days. Until now that I am already married, my family life may not be that perfect, but we strive hard to grow in goodness coupled with our prayer to God.</p>	<p><b>Faith is believing in Christ's words.</b>  <i>Ako nagatuo mga ang pagtuo usa ka gasa tungod kay si kristo mismo nag ingon nga bulahan kadtong namati ng mituo nga wala makita kanako ug alaot kadtong wala mituo tungod kay nagpakabuta man sila. Mao nga ako mituo tungod kay mao ang gasa sa Ginoo.</i>  <u>Rough Translation:</u> I do believe that faith is gift because Christ said "blessed are those who believed even if they didn't see me and how unfortunate are those unbelievers because they make themselves blind. Hence, I believe because this is God's grace for me.</p>
<p><b>Service as blessing.</b>            When God called me to serve Him, I could say that it was a great blessing in my life.</p>	<p><b>Faith is a gift because of being victorious in trials.</b>  <i>Usa kini kagasa tungod kay daghan mga nasinati nako nga bisan sa kalisod sa kinabuhi adona gihapon grasya nga miabot.</i></p>
<p><b>Effective program and Personal Invitation.</b>            As a lay minister in our GKK, I could say some improvements implemented by the set of officers. This gives way for us to participate because of their invitation and program.</p>	<p><u>Rough Translation:</u> Faith is a gift because of the so many difficult things I experience in life there are still grace/goodness that had happened.</p>
<p><b>Personal Initiative.</b>            There is no one invited me to become a lay minister since in the beginning of my journey. I am just an ordinary person attending "Kasaulugan sa Pulong" (KSP) every Sunday. In fact, this was my weekly routine.</p>	<p><b>Faith as blessing.</b>  <i>Nagatuo ako nga gasa ang pagtuong Kristiyano tungod kay daghang grasya ang niabot sa among kinabuhi sukad ni nagatuo ako.</i>  <u>Rough Translation:</u> I believe that faith is a gift because of so many blessings that I received when I started to believe.</p>

**Table 2.***Continued.*

Significant Statements on BEC experience.	Statement on Faith as Gift
<p><b>Orientation in the Family.</b> In our family, I am the only one serving in our GKK as a lay minister this time. At that time, my grandfather (Lolo) side of my mother also served our GKK in the past. As far as I could remember, one of my Lolo's (Christobal M.) is part of building our GKK chapel</p>	<p><b>Faith as salvation.</b> Faith as gift – granted only to undeserving sinners, through which we personally receive and share in the full salvation.</p>
<p>.</p>	<p><b>Faith as gift of the Holy Spirit.</b> Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a message of knowledge faith, Gifts of healing.</p>
	<p><b>Christian Faith as Salvation.</b> <i>Kay tungod sa atong pagtoong kristyano gihatagan kita ug kaluwasan mao ang iyang gasa kanato.</i></p> <p><u>Rough Translation:</u> Because of our Christian faith we received salvation as a gift to us.</p>

***Significant themes in the experiences of BEC lay leaders in the Basic Ecclesial Community.***

In the experiences of the research participants, they were able to identify several factors for making them participate as lay leaders in the community. The sub themes indicated in table (2) on top of the statements of the study participants were identified and classified according to their meaning and closes value. Hence, there are three major factors or themes named in this part: (1) *Family influence* – which is marked by their utterance of childhood memories when their grandparents and parents brought them on Sunday worships to participate in the BEC activities. (2) *BEC activity* – the activities initiated by the BEC leaders help in shaping future BEC leaders. This becomes significant among the current leaders' reason of becoming leaders themselves. They were able to recall significant memories in attempting to different activities intended for BEC members. (3) *The initiative to serve* – serving the BEC is considered as blessings for the BEC

lay leaders. They see this one not simply as an opportunity to serve but also as a blessing in return. This is a type of service whether paid or not that they are willing to do or contribute as a way to serve God through the community. They see their active participation in the BEC as a divine blessing and in return the way of giving back by way of serving is also perceived as a blessing. Thus, these factors became the way for them to participate in the BEC movement.

### ***Emerging themes on 'Faith as Gift'***

Four major themes, and six sub themes, had been identified as factors for the participants in their perception of faith as gift (see Figure 3). *First*, faith centers on Christ. It is on this aspect that they recognize the value and importance of faith as gift which makes Christ as the object. "Christ's work penetrates the depths of our being and transforms us radically, making us adopted children of God and sharers in the divine nature. It thus modifies all our relationships, our place in this world and in the universe, and opens them to God's own life of communion" (LF #42). *Second*, faith as gift of the Holy Spirit. The second theme recognizes the presence of the Triune God but emphasizes the special presence of the Holy Spirit. "First, the name of the Trinity — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — is invoked upon the catechumen. Thus, from the outset, a synthesis of the journey of faith is provided" (LF #42). *Third*, faith gives way to salvation. Life faith, salvation is also a gift from God. This gives way to the understanding of the Catechism of the Catholic Church that say, "faith as grace is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him" (CCC#154). The participants articulated the effect of faith as a way of responding to the gift of salvation offered by God in this aspect. *Fourth*, faith is a way to blessing. Hence, the perception on faith as blessing relates to how the participants were able to see it as something precious as a gift too, one that they also receive from God. *Lastly*, faith as being victorious in trials. They see the importance of their perseverance in the difficult situations of life as a gift of their faith. It is because that they 'believe' that they were able to sustain all through out every trial that comes their way.



**Figure 3.***Elements of faith 'as gift'*

Faith, as described by the participants, though personal, but experiential in their involvement in the BEC activities. In figure 3, this was comprised of the centrality of faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit. This, basically, mean faith comes from the divine or God. The remaining aspects of the elements of faith- salvific, blessing and victorious, generate a meaning that faith is rewarding. Hence, Figure 3: *'the elements of faith'* describes as something as the 'seed' and the 'fruit' of their BEC engagement. The closest way for them to experience and express faith was in the form of church activities like in the BEC- the *kasaulugan sa pulong*, etc.

***The Faith Experience***

Table 3 presents the significant statement on faith experience. The table illustrates the relevant statements and emerging themes of how the BEC lay leaders were able to experience the gift of faith. A rough translation is provided for words spoken and written in the vernacular.

**Table 3.**

*Significant statements and description of the faith-experience of BEC lay leaders.*

<b>Significant Statements</b>	<b>Emerging Themes and sub themes</b>
<p><i>Ang akong kinabuhi nga gihatag sa Ginoo us ana ka dakung Gasa nga gihatag sa Ginoo nga si bisan kinsa walay makalabaw kaniya. Ang paghatag ug bili sa atong kinabuhi susama usab sa paghatag ta ug bili sa Ginoo tungod kay siya man ang atong magbubuhat.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> I see my life as God's greatest gift and nothing can be compared to God. Valuing one's life is giving importance to God because God is our maker.</p>	<p><b><i>Valuing the gift of Life.</i></b></p>
<p><i>Aduna gyud ug dako ang nahatag nga kausaban sa akong kinabuhi. Sama nalang sa panagbingkil namung magti-ayon ng, ug mi abot gyud ang punto nga nawad-an pakog paglaum ug nabungkag gyud ang among pamilya. Apan tungod kay nagatuo man ako, o kami sa Ginoo uban sa akong pamilya maong nabuo gihapun ang among pamilya ug nagpabihin diha sa pag-alagad sa atong Ginoong Hesus.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> Faith can give something a big difference in my life. Just like for example in our quarrel as husband and wife, there are really time that you feel hopeless that you think this argument will end our family. However, because of my faith, our faith in God as a family, we are still intact, and we are still remaining in serving our Lord Jesus.</p>	<p><b><i>Making difference in the personal and family life.</i></b></p>

**Table 3.***Continued.*

Significant Statements	Emerging Themes and sub themes
<p>Sa panahon sa pandemic daghan gyud <i>ang nakuha sa dagan sa panahon, daghan man ang mamatay tungod sa maong sakit apan daghan pud ang naka amgo nga mao nadaw ning silot nga gihatag sa Dios. Apan ang tinuod nakabutang o nakasulat na kin isa bibliya diha sa “Ang Gipadayag.”</i> Didto Mabasa ang tanan mahitabo kon na moabot na ang Ginoo.</p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> Because of the pandemic a lot of things had been wasted, several lives had been taken because of the virus, but several persons were able to realize that this is God’s punishment. The truth is that these things had been written already in Revelation that these things will happen when the Lord returns.</p> <p><i>Oo nausab ang among kiabuti tungod sa mga salita niya sa Bibliya nga maoy naggiya sa tanan.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> Yes! my life had been changed because of God’s words written in the Bible which serve as the guidance for all.</p> <p>I was able to read Bible Verses during regular nature walks like warning Prayer, regularly reading Bible verses can help you Practice your Faith.</p> <p>I learned to meditate and incorporated that into my daily routine, this one change has made a huge impact on my life.</p>	<p><i>Personal realization and believing God’s words in the Bible.</i></p> <p><i>Maturing in faith and becoming devoted.</i></p>

**Table 3.***Continued.*

<i>Significant Statements</i>	<i>Emerging Themes and sub themes</i>
<p><i>Ang giya sa Ginoo ang kaayo niya sa tao nga maoy instrument sa tanang maayo.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> The guidance of God, His goodness to man, is the instrument of all good things.</p>	<b>Total Reliance on God.</b>
<p><i>Sa pagpaambit ug grasya sa uban pagtabang og paghatag ug pagtagad sa uban.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> By way of sharing our blessings to others and by way of giving importance to others.</p>	<b>Sharing one's life and blessing.</b>
<p>Based on my experiences as a lay minister, there are times I really encountered challenges especially in terms of my daily material needs and the needs of my family. Yes, when times are hard, it can be difficult to believe that God is still there. I cling to His promises, though! He promised to never leave me and my family. He also told me that I should count hard times as joy, since hard times cause me to cry out to Him for help and depending on Him is a good thing. Unexpectedly, I have found incredible hope, peace, and joy because of my faith in God.</p>	<p><b>Growing in faith.</b></p> <p><b>Unexpected reward because of faith.</b></p>
<p>It is my true faith in God that my life changes for good to come in. Before, I was wasting my life because my actions did not reflect a life. I was too proud of. I knew what I was passionate about but did not know if following my passion aligned with God's purpose for my life.</p>	<b>Faith as way to change my life.</b>

**Table 3.***Continued.*

Significant Statements	Emerging Themes and sub themes
It was only after I have faced utter hopelessness, complete despair, and a total sense of loss that I learn about faith.	<b>Faith as hope</b>
When I feel so broken, so lost and abandoned, my life is shattered all around me, and my heart's broken in countless pieces, faith starts showing up.	

Three major themes emerged from the several sub themes that had been identified in relation to the experience of BEC lay leaders in relation to their Christian faith. These major themes are the core elements of faith: (a) *transformative*, (b) *rewarding*, and (c) *godly*. First is the transforming aspect of faith. *Faith is transformation*. The value of the experience of faith here is identified with how faith changes, not simply the perception toward life, but also the changes in their way of life. This faith experience gives way to change not only their personal but also their family life. Next theme is *faith is viewed as rewarding*. Faith gives hope. It makes oneself more open to God, becoming more devoted in the Christian way of living like in prayer, meditation and bible reading. The participants were able to experience faith in a way of making themselves mature in living and sharing themselves to others through service. Lastly, the experience of faith is visible in the recognition of the *value of life and the presence of God*. The important link between life and God, as the author of life, is manifested in the testimony of the BEC lay leaders as a concrete way of experiencing the gift of faith.

### ***Contributing to the Mission of the Church***

Table 4 presents the themes and significant statement on the contributing aspect of faith in doing the mission of the Church. Column 1 displays the significant statements in relation to the theme of contributing to the mission of the Church. The second column are the identified themes in relation to the data provided by the participants.

**Table 4.***Faith and the continuing mission of the Church.*

Significant Statements	Emerging themes
<p><i>Dako ang tabang sa simbahan, sama nalang sa pag-ampo sa mga tawo nga nasakit tungod sa covid-19 virus.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> The Church helps a lot just like for example in offering prayers for people who had been affected because of the COVID-19 virus.</p>	<p><b>Participating in prayer. Prayer is seen as an important aspect in the life of the Church.</b></p>
<p><i>Ang angayan natong buhaton mao ang pagpadayon sa pagpahayag mahi tungod sa gitudlo ni Hesu kristo, ug pinaagi ni ana kitang tanan magmalipayon kay diha ni kristo ang tinuod nga “Gugma” ang mopatigbabaw.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> The right thing for us to do is to continue evangelizing the words taught by Jesus Christ, through this we will experience lasting happiness with Christ because of our love that prevails.</p>	<p><b>Prevail in love and continue the work of preaching God’s words. Participants were able to recognize the mission entrusted by Christ to the Church and being continued through their active participation in evangelizing.</b></p>
<p><i>Makahatag og inspirasyon diha sa uban ug mulambo ang atong katilingban.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> By way of giving inspiration to other so that our community will improve/progress.</p>	<p><b>Inspiring others. Participating in the mission of the Church is perceived by way of becoming and being a model or inspiration for others.</b></p>
<p><i>Ang paghatag og pagtagad sa atong mga kaigsoonan nga anaa sa simbahan labi na ang mga pari og mga madre. Padayon nga pagsuporta diha kanila.</i></p> <p><u>Rough translation:</u> By giving importance to our brethren in the Church especially to the priests and nuns. Let us continue supporting them.</p>	<p><b>Valuing the Church ministers. The due recognition is also to the priest and nuns as especial part of the Church.</b></p>

**Table 4.***Continued.*

Significant Statements	Emerging themes
<p>I saw a group of choir very limited members at that time, thus, I volunteered myself to become their member since I have a gift of voice I do believe. I asked them first, if it is okay to become a choir member. Fortunately, they said yes and they accepted me. This was the starting point or turning point of my life where God called me to serve Him.</p>	<p><b>Serving with desire. Recognizing the different ministries in the Church helps the lay faithful in doing or participating in the mission of the Church.</b></p>
<p>Since our two lay ministers in our GKK is deficient in terms of number, the parish priest of our Church in Caraga appointed me to become a lay minister to add on and complete the number of needed lay ministers in our GKK. I was not able to refuse an offer of our parish priest, because I do believe that it was a calling of God to serve Him for the common good of all. I right away grabbed the offer since it is seldom in my life to encounter such an offer, to become a lay minister. Thus, we became three ministers in our GKK now. It was Fr. Joms who invited me and appointed me to become a lay minister. What I did, first, I consulted the faithful in our GKK if it was okay for them that I would become their lay minister. Luckily, they recognized and acknowledged me as their lay minister. Hence, I did not refuse such an offer, since the faithful accepted me and gave me a chance to serve them.</p>	<p><b>Taking the challenge. Responding to the invitation and the need of the BEC community is also seen as an important aspect in participating in the mission of the Church.</b></p>

**Table 4.***Continued.*

Significant Statements	Emerging themes
<p>San Francisco De BorJa, the name of our GKK Saint. This is one of the oldest GKKs in the entire Mindanao. 1889 started this GKK. I could not remember any stories concerning this GKK, but I heard some good stories from our older faithful who belongs to this GKK.</p> <p>For the first week of the month, there are two Kasaulugan sa Pulong (KSP) First Friday and First Sunday. On the second week, there is only one Kasaulugan sa Pulong (KSP) same on the third and fourth week. During the first Friday of the month Kasaulugan sa Pulong (KSP), Church goers was very limited, only those GKK functionaries attended. On the first Sunday of the month Kasaulugan sa Pulong (KSP), our GKK is full. People belongs to this GKK is very active and participative.</p>	<p><b>Religious History. Taking Pride with the history and culture of the BEC makes them eager to participate more.</b></p>

The understanding of faith as gift among the participants is seen and observed in their (1) *Participation* in the liturgical activities of the Church, communal or personal. “The sacraments communicate an incarnate memory, linked to the times and places of our lives, linked to all our senses; in them the whole person is engaged as a member of a living subject and part of a network of communitarian relationships. While the sacraments are indeed sacraments of faith,[36] it can also be said that faith itself possesses a sacramental structure” (LF #4). Pope John Paul II, on the other hand, says in his homily that “the ecclesial community on the diocesan level, with the Bishop as the sign and center of unity, is nourished constantly by the loyal adherence to the word of God and to an authentic worship according to that basic relationship between faith and worship: ‘lex orandi, lex credendi’(Homily, Pope John Paul II, Davao City, Philippines Feb. 20, 1981, paragraph #2). Moreover, the Pope added, that “it also strengthened by the bond of love among the members, and by the conscious participation of all members according to the gifts each one has received for the building up of the local Church”.



(2) **Actively Responding** to the invitation of Church leaders to participate as ministers and others. As lay ministers, their responses to the invitation of becoming lay leaders is seen as a way to respond to God and to participate in the activities of the Church. The Plenary Council of the Philippines II (PCP II) reflects this idea of empowering “the poor and to work with them for social justice” (Dionisio, 2011). The same thought was reflected in the statement of Archbishop Romulo Valles, DD, CBCP president, on January 28, 2022, with his pastoral statement on Stewardship. The good archbishop said that “every gift is a responsibility. We recognize every gift, nurture it, generously share it with others, and gratefully return it with increase to the Lord” (Valles, 2021).

(3) **Serving** with desire their community. “That faith is not only presented as a journey, but also as a process of building, the preparing of a place in which human beings can dwell together with one another” (LF #50). The CBCP president, Archbishop Romulo Valles, DD., exhorted with the same tone of service by way of saying “let us not be afraid to give freely and cheerfully, even in times of crisis and difficulty like the Covid-19 pandemic that we are presently experiencing” (Valles, 2021).

(4) **Becoming** a Christian model to others who inspires others to serve also. “Faith, in fact, needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and proportionate to what is communicated...There is a special means for passing down this fullness, a means capable of engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others” (LF# 40). The Basic Ecclesial Communities realizes the vision of the Plenary Council of the Philippines (1953 & 1991) of bearing “witness to the Catholic Faith of the Filipino people, and to decree such legislation as may be thought necessary or convenient for the preservation, enrichment and propagation of Catholic life in all its aspects” (CBCP online).

These four major themes merged the articulated values stipulated in the sub themes of Table 4, identifying the factors in contributing concretely toward the understanding of faith as gift and integrating these ‘aspects’ in continuing evangelization and mission of the Catholic Church. These themes signify among the participants the concepts and perceptions of themselves participating in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church through their Basic Ecclesial Community. The significant themes identified from the uttered statements of the participants of the study marks the salient points of the elements of faith from the New Testament, the description of

a lay faithful from McBrien's concept added with the thoughts from *Lumen Fidei*. In understanding the influence of the Catholic religion in the Philippines that had happened 500 years ago, the Plenary Council of the Philippines stipulated these ideals which marks present in some of the core themes of the result of the study. Today, the same enthusiasm and spirit is being experienced in the Church through the active involvement of the lay faithful, especially its leaders, in the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Considerably, the elements of faith and the duty of the faithful as described by the plenary council (II) is felt in the utterances of the gift of faith among the BEC lay leaders of San Salvador del Mundo Parish in Caraga Davao Oriental. The gift of faith is *Christocentric*. It centers on Christ. This basic testimony of what is the gift of faith among the BEC lay leaders summarizes all the other testimonies they uttered. For our Christian faith can never be considered Christian in the absence of Christ. Basas (2019), stressing the Ecclesiological aspects of PCP II attest to this important contribution of the 'facts of faith' which generates the evangelization of the country by stating the two important realities: "Jesus Christ being the ground of the Church and source of conversion; and Discipleship, signifying the peoples' response of faith to the call of Christ". Moreover, the significant aspect with regards to how the lay leaders were able to experience the gift of faith revolves around the transformative value of faith. Faith transforms a person into the image and likeness of God by valuing life and giving inspiration to the other members of the BEC. Lastly, the BEC lay leaders were able to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church through their conscious effort of participating in the liturgical celebrations, responding, and serving as lay leaders, and becoming fully Christian and truly alive.

Truly, these significant statements on faith by the BEC lay leaders recognizes the efforts laid by the organizers for the celebration of the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines- everything works according to the plan of God. Thus, faith as a gift will ignite the Church to continue doing its mission in realizing the Kingdom of God here on Earth. The Basic Ecclesial Communities become instrumental of making the groundwork of the Church participatory for all Christians- lay leaders or not.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the information gathered from the participants emulate three important lessons especially in celebrating the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines:

1. Liturgical celebration in the community level (BEC) is significant in continuing the mission of the Catholic church especially in the absence of the ordained minister. The lay leaders acting as extraordinary ministers extends the saving acts of Christ in the community through the “*Kasaulugan sa Pulong*” or the Liturgy of the Word. From the result of the analysis of Table 1, several factors were mentioned in their way of becoming active participants in the BEC. These factors gave them the opportunity to serve.
2. Lay leaders are ‘faith’ community leaders. Providing a continuous formation for lay leaders remains valuable in honing community leaders according to the ideals of the Catholic church. The presence of the Lay leaders reflects the image of Christ and Church also. In table 3, the lay leaders were able to articulate the invaluable experience of faith, which is transformative, rewarding, and godly. Hence, The BEC activities remain integral in extending the presence of the Church to the people.
3. Lay leaders are co-missionaries. Empowering the lay leaders can help intensifying the missionary work of the church on the ground. The presence of the lay leaders in the community brings alive the pastoral care. Table 4 stipulates the reason for the continuous service of lay leaders in contributing to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

In the end, this study was very limited in identifying the factors of the continuous service rendered by lay leaders in the basic ecclesiastical community through the gift of faith. The proponents of the study wish to conduct the same study also in other BECs to dig deeper the significance of what had been known and identified of faith as gift in the BEC of San Francisco de Borja in Santa Fe, Caraga, Davao Oriental. As the proponents of this study, we are recommending that the Diocese of Mati, through its BEC center, to further strengthen the on-going formation of lay leaders to promote the integrity and chrism that they are experiencing in their way service. Engaging them in leadership training will enable them to enhance fully their skills in leading people and the community. Coming up with community activities will encourage more active participation from the community as projected in the result and in the discussion of this study.

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