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Ariane Shelley Q. Pepito
Colegio de San Juan de Letran

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bell hooks' Sisterhood Model: An Integration of Religious Congregations and Women's Advocacy in the Philippines

Ariane Shelley Q. Pepito
Colegio de San Juan de Letran
arianeshelley@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, Catholic religious sisters serve their communities as teachers, nurses, leaders, and companions, as a commitment to their chosen vocations. While their acts of service and charity is a sincere commitment to Gospel, their identities continue to be veiled and shaped by the enduring image of a Madonna: a symbol of womanhood inspired in the figure of Mary characterized by purity, chastity, obedience, and maternal devotion. This image, although revered, also places expectations on how sisters are seen and see themselves creating tension between ecclesial identity and public advocacy. This study explores how Filipino Catholic sisters reconcile traditional Marian ideas with emerging forms of feminist agency. Through the lens of bell hooks' Sisterhood Model, and Luce Irigaray's Strategic Essentialism, this research explores how religious sisters engage in this negotiation without fully abandoning their ecclesial identity. By employing a feminist power analysis, the study examines how power—expressed through formation systems, religious vows, and authority structures—shapes their roles and spiritual practices. The study utilizes qualitative interviews with two women from active religious congregations, centered in their lived experience as sites of institutional negotiation and feminist transformation. Findings show that these women viewed religious life as an awakening of consciousness with social concerns grounded on traditional symbols and doctrines, rather than as a life in seclusion.

Keywords: *bell hooks' Sisterhood Model, Luce Irigaray Strategic Essentialism, Madonna Image, Philippine Politics, Religious Sisters*

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, Catholic nuns have taken important roles in society, within classrooms as teachers, healers for the sick, even assisting in disaster relief operations to support both government and non-government initiatives as expressions of their faith in service and charity. Religious sisters, from the Spanish era and present, have significantly

contributed to community development acting as religious clerics and are mostly associated with roles as hospitality personnels and teachers in Parochial Catholic Schools where they promote moral leadership through prayers and other spiritual practices (Aguja, 2013; Aguilar, 1988). Their commitment is rooted not only in personal faith but also in the broader teachings of the Church. Papal and conciliar documents such as *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) offer a theological grounding that calls for greater equity and a Church more attuned to the realities of the modern world. These texts encourage a vision of religious life that is not confined to prayer and contemplation alone but one that actively engages with the needs and struggles of society.

Yet even as they step into public roles, they continue to carry the weight of centuries-old symbolic expectations mostly shaped by the deep Marian devotion in Filipino culture. One powerful influence is the Madonna image which is a revered but limiting ideal that prescribes women as pure obedient, silent, and nurturing (Jansen, 2022; Peracullo, 2017). Although many sisters find comfort and strength in this Marian devotion, the same imagery also constrain them by reinforcing patriarchal notions that limit their agency especially in dialogues around women's sexuality and social leadership explicitly shown in matters of reproductive healthcare, divorce, even political engagement (Bernarte et al., 2018; Choi, 2014; Jansen, 2022). This tension between devotion and faith continues to shape how these religious women move through both the church and the wider world.

While existing literature has acknowledged these tensions with their foundational models, the internal processes through which Catholic sisters negotiate and reconcile these paradoxes remain underexplored (Aguilar, 1988). Catholic religious sisters, particularly those engaged in apostolic missions, offer a compelling case for examining how women navigate the contradictions between ecclesial ideals of feminine submission who are often symbolized by the Madonna imagery and their active roles in society (Eze, et al., 2013; Krishnaja & Jose, 2024).

This study argues that Catholic religious sisters in the Philippines enact feminist agency, not in opposition to the Church, but through the vows established during religious formation. It examines how the formation process in religious life through the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, along with the hierarchical authority of congregational structures, shapes their moral and spiritual consciousness that later on determines whether they embrace a contemplative life, apostolic, or missionary. While formation deepens their theological understanding, it also sets firm boundaries on what they can and cannot do within the Church (Aguilar, 1988; Yuen, 2016). Within these boundaries, however, religious sisters cultivate a distinct mode of resistance: one that operates not through overt rebellion but through conviction and solidarity (Dames, 2010; Henold, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Influence Then and Now

In the Philippines, from the spiritual authority of the precolonial *babaylan* to the colonial restructuring of vocation and the post-Vatican II reorientation toward justice, the role of Filipina Catholic sisters has evolved in tandem with the nation's historical and socio-political shifts (Barry, 2014; Santiago, 2001; Heep, 2014). During the precolonial period, the Philippines practiced an Animist faith and was rich in indigenous spirituality with higher levels of gender fluidity. According to Santiago (1995) and Fluckiger (2018), indigenous women spiritual leaders known as *babaylan* in Visayas or *catalonan* in *Tagalog*, held sacred and social authority rooted in their spiritual prestige, serving as healers and ritual leaders, drawing power from their association with feminine generativity or the capacity to create, sustain, and mediate life (Fluckiger, 2018; Kawada, 2006; Reid, 1988).

This generative power was seen not only in biological terms but also as a spiritual force. Their vocation wasn't clerical—but embodied—reflecting a spiritual ethic grounded in reciprocity and relational responsibility. They were seen as carrying multiple spirits within them, a belief that deepened their connection to the divine and affirmed their role as mediators between worlds (Fluckiger, 2018). Although these women operated outside the framework of institutional religion, they embodied a spiritual vocation that answers to the needs of their communities and their perceived relationship to the otherworld (Berger, 1967; Fluckiger, 2018; Reid, 1988). Their power is derived from their role as cosmic mediators, positioning them at the heart of community life and governance all together (Santiago, 1995; Fluckiger, 2018).

With the onset of Spanish colonization, this tradition was disrupted by missionaries who saw these women as a threat because of their extensive influence among communities, resulting in a spiritual struggle between indigenous beliefs and Christianity. In the process of this struggle, missionaries imposed a Catholic model of vocation that emphasized submission to ecclesiastical authority—Marian images—to integrate colonial dominance in national governance (Berger, 1967; Fluckiger, 2018; Rafael, 1987; Santiago, 1995). Missionaries discredited *babaylans* by labeling their practices as demonic; as a tactical move, they appropriated their spiritual symbols to convince them to convert and become promotional agents of colonial ideology. The appropriation of *anitos* or wooden or gold figures marked the introduction of syncretic icons such as the veneration of the oldest Marian image: *Our Lady of Guidance in Ermita, Manila*. These efforts to erase their authority was part of a colonial campaign to replace indigenous culture and traditions with a rigid, male-dominated hierarchy in favor of Spain's imperial control (Brewer, 2004; Santiago, 1995). Spanish friars replaced *anitos* and female-led rituals with Marian imagery and male sacraments, a substitution that not only suppressed indigenous beliefs but redirected people to Catholic clergy (Rafael, 1987;

Ileto, 1979). Another example is the veneration of the black statue near Manila Bay known as the '*Protectress of the Galleons*' and '*Patroness of the August and Ever Loyal City*' in 1571.

By the beginning of the 17th century, as networks of babaylans and catolonans transitioned in faith and customs, early *beatas* who lived religious lives without full canonical status, navigated these constraints by cultivating spiritual discipline within patriarchal structures (Santiago, 1995). They reconciled their beliefs through Marian devotion to preserve traces of their former spiritual power (Santiago, 1995). By embracing roles in education and monastic labor, they transformed obedience into a conscious strategy for resilience to survive the colonial dominance of Christianity, resulting in the syncretism of indigenous spirituality and Catholic practices (Santiago, 2001). Archival accounts of *beaterios* like the *Beaterio de la Compañía de Jesús*, founded by Ignacia del Espíritu Santo in the 1680s, reveal how native Filipina women established spiritual communities independently and maintained self-regulation and sustained apostolic works, showing religious agency even within a constrained colonial Church (Santiago, 2001). Though these women were structurally subordinate, these women asserted influence within their communities by subtly reshaping the meaning of vocation in a colonized and gendered religious order. Therefore, despite colonial limitations, they exercised agency through teaching and providing communal service, reframing obedience as a form of resilience rather than passivity.

During the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, significant developments transpired for women and Philippine society alike (Santiago, 2001). The council's radical transformation of the Catholic Church's identity as an enduring institution in a world of modernity, introduced many concepts with lasting implications in the contemporary period (Barry, 2014; Eze, 2013). It provided a newfound appreciation for women and allowed them to participate in committee meetings and deliberations; becoming leaders and activists that enabled women's movements to flourish through enfranchisement and pastoral advocacy. Laywomen within the Church, who called for the renewal of the institution, became the foremost speakers for the enhanced appreciation and uplifting of the role roles of women within society (Hilsdon, 1995; Claussen, 2001; Santiago, 2001). Post-Vatican II religious formation marks a shift towards active engagement with society, influenced by liberation theology, American missionary pedagogy, and indigenous resistance movements (Barry, 2014; Claussen, 2001; Fiorenza, 1975; Rafael, 1995; Yuen, 2016). This shift towards a more socially engaged spirituality reminds us of the earlier legacy of babaylans whose authority stemmed from their social role in governance and public advocacy (Hilsdon, 1995; Reid, 1988). Here, post-Vatican II sisters began to see their vocation as a form of public witness rooted in justice and care (Fiorenza, 1975; Santiago, 2001).

Under the Marcos dictatorship, many sisters risked persecution by sheltering activists and documenting state violence demonstrating a radical reinterpretation of obedience as fidelity to conscience and solidarity (Aguilar, 1988; Barry, 2014; Doran, 1999). Their resistance echoed precolonial models of spiritual authority where women acted as guardians of moral and divine order even under threat.

In recent years, scholars have identified a renewed expression of feminist spiritual agency among Filipina sisters (Barry, 2014; Fluckiger, 2020). They incorporate Marian and babaylanic imagery to assert moral leadership within patriarchal institutions, positioning vocation as both spiritual commitment and political engagement (Brewer, 2001; MacDonald, 2004). However, despite this robust body of literature, most studies have emphasized the external social roles and institutional impact of Catholic sisters. The internal process and the negotiation of religious identity among religious sisters remain underexplored. This review foregrounds that gap by examining how spiritual agency rooted in both Indigenous and Catholic traditions continues to evolve within women's lived experience of religious life.

Feminist Agency Within the Church

Filipina Catholic sisters have long lived at the intersection of theological formation and feminist consciousness (Agustin, 1987). While formation in religious life traditionally emphasizes obedience, silence, and humility, many sisters reinterpret these disciplines through a liberative theological lens. For instance, the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in Metro Manila have implemented significant structural changes with over 80% of novices now engaging in open group dialogue and participating in exposure retreats among marginalized communities, which are practices that cultivate a socially engaged spirituality (Claussen, 2001). Another example is when veteran nuns joined activists during the Marcos dictatorship to defend people's rights. Sr. Asuncion Martinez of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary described such participation in labor strikes, such as the La Todeña strike of 1975 as a second baptism and signaled transformation of traditional vows into acts of radical solidarity with the poor (Doyo, 2017). In the theological sphere, scholars like Sr. Virginia Fabella have contributed to feminist theology by amplifying Asian women's voices and reconstructing Christianity as a liberating force for women and society at large (Fabella & Park, 2015). In communities shaped by liberation theology and contextual feminist ethics, formation becomes more than spiritual discipline, and it becomes a space for critical reflection and ethical discernment. As Santiago (2001) and Barry (2014) note, contemporary sisters do not merely submit to patriarchal structures, but they engage them with theological reflexivity, reshaping the contours of religious life from within.

This dynamic reengagement transforms the meaning of vows. Obedience evolves into a dialogical act of conscience marked by prayerful listening and communal discernment. In formation programs like those of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters, obedience is no longer framed as passive submission but as shared discernment through facilitated group reflections and social activities, as documented in Claussen's (2001) ethnography. Poverty becomes an embodied sign of solidarity with those whose suffering is often rendered invisible, particularly women living under structural violence (Mitra, 2023). Sisters involved in urban poor missions, such as those from the Good Shepherd Sisters, live alongside street vendors and domestic workers, reshaping poverty as a conscious commitment to the daily struggles of marginalized women (Huriani, et al., 2022; Santiago, 1995).

Chastity, far from a private moral code, reflects a relational ethic grounded in justice and presence. For example, in Sr. Mary John Mananzan's theological writings wherein chastity is reframed as a refusal to participate in exploitative relationships, whether sexual, economic, or political, thus making space for deeper spiritual solidarity and availability to others (Mananzan, 1998; Samson, 2023). In these re-articulations, sisters transform spiritual commitments into resources for resistance, witnessing to a faith that resists domination while remaining rooted in Catholic tradition (Barry, 2014; Choi & Jolly, 2014; Friesen, 1989; Santiago, 1995). Instead of walking away from their vows or rejecting the Church to embrace feminism, many nuns find strength and meaning within their vows. They see them not as restrictions, but as powerful tools for moral resistance. In doing this, they blur the lines between what is traditionally seen as feminine or masculine. Their lived experiences reflect a more honest interpretation of women's lives.

During Martial Law, this renewal was lived out because of urgent political weight. Many nuns, whether contemplative, apostolic, or missionaries, took a stand against the Marcos dictatorship by sheltering activists, documenting abuses, and publicly denouncing injustices of the regime as an extension of their religious life (Aguilar, 1988; Doran, 1998; Libed, 2010; Mendoza, 2017). Archival reports on the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, co-founded by religious sisters have detailed how nuns like Sr. Mariani Dimaranan, who gathered testimonies from torture survivors and helped coordinate underground support for political prisoners as acts rooted in a theology of justice and compassion (Aquino, 1989). These acts were not only simply political, but they were also spiritually rooted in a theology of justice, compassion and fidelity to conscience that re-theologized vocation as a personal responsibility to act on someone's suffering. Their resistance emerges not from a rejection of the Church but from a deeper fidelity to its teachings.

This synthesis of faith and feminism reflects what Barry (2014) identifies as a distinct model of faith-based feminist agency. It is not defined by opposition to tradition but by its

transformation through lived experience and exposure to theology. bell hooks' notion of "sisterhood" is particularly resonant here. As she writes, "sisterhood is...the coming together of women to challenge patriarchy and to create spaces where we can be truly self-defined." (Hooks, 1984; Norman, 2006). In many ways, Filipina sisters embody this vision not by separating faith from feminist critique but by allowing them to shape each other in praxis. Their communities become spiritual-political spaces where justice and conscience converge.

Although feminist theology has made important strides globally, there's still a noticeable gap when it comes to understanding how Filipina religious women live out these ideas in their everyday lives. Their practice offers a compelling vision of feminist agency that is not forged outside the Church but within it amid formation and committed service. This is not merely obedience reinterpreted as it is obedience reclaimed.

The Madonna Archetype and Ecclesial Femininity

The Madonna image occupies a central position in the moral imagination of the Catholic Church particularly in the Philippines where Marian devotion is both widespread and deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual life. Within the institutional Church, Mary has often been constructed as the archetype of ideal womanhood—silent, obedient, virginal, and self-sacrificing—thus shaping ecclesial femininity into a model of moral purity and submission (Kiker, 2022). This theological construction not only conditions how women are perceived within the Church but also how they come to perceive themselves. Doctrinal texts and papal encyclicals, such as *Humanae Vitae* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*, reinforce these norms by positioning women primarily as mothers and caretakers thus valorizing their reproductive and affective labor while limiting their participation in ecclesial authority (Bonifacio, 2018; Keary, 2024; MacLochlainn, 2019; North, 1991; Wuthnow, 2022). The Madonna becomes both a moral compass and a disciplinary figure and a gendered ideal that serves to sustain patriarchal ecclesial structures by prescribing the acceptable contours of feminine virtue (Camacho, 2007; Peracullo, 2017). As a model, this has deeply influenced the personal ambitions of most Filipina women.

In the Philippines, this model magnifies the expectation among women to inhabit nurturing roles as mothers and caregivers and links women with the pressures of purity and sacrifice. As a result, many Filipino women face pressure to conform to these roles even at the expense of their personal aspirations while women who reject this—by pursuing careers or choosing to decentralize themselves against men—face social stigmatization or spiritual guilt. This is seen in the low participation of women in the labor force. In 2021, 51% of women were working compared to 75% of men. Most of these women were in caregiving roles and largely consisted of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). These women are framed to be examples of

this imagery as mothers who engage in emotional and financial sacrifice that is expected of motherhood. Aside from domesticity, the imagery also shapes the political landscape for women in the Philippines. The access of women to political leadership struggles against gendered expectations which frames politics and leadership as a domain for male leadership (Siriban, 2023). As per the World Values Survey (2020), many believe that men are better suited for political leadership because women are expected to focus on family life. However, in this case, the Madonna imagery has been used tactically by elite women to enter political spheres in which virtues of purity and moral superiority of women acted as counterbalance in political corruption. Although it worked in the political ascensions of former presidents Cory Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, their entry demands specific requirements and are not applicable to all women. However, it underscores the significance of the imagery in terms of building a political identity and entry.

Yet this image, while historically used to consolidate control over women's roles, is not a fixed symbol. Similar to the political ascendancy of former presidents Cory Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Filipina religious sisters who are embedded in the lived contradictions of faith and patriarchy, have found ways to reinterpret the Madonna not as a restrictive mold but as a strategic and culturally resonant figure of empowerment. Religious sisters draw on the maternal and intercessory qualities of Mary to establish authority within a church (Aguja, 2013; Barry, 2014; Ebaugh, 1993; Leming, 2000). Their engagement with the model is enacted through lived praxis such as disaster response, teaching, and political activism, where Mary is invoked not to uphold silence but to speak into injustice (Gervais, 2018; Libed, 2010; Yilmaz, 2024).

This approach connects with what Luce Irigaray refers to as “strategic essentialism”. Strategic essentialism is the tactical use of essentialized identities to subvert the very systems that produce them (Irigaray, 1985; Kane, 2010; Leclerc, 2006). Instead of rejecting the image outright, Filipina sisters embrace it with the intention to use its characteristics to challenge the very norm it upholds. Through Mary, these women act not as passive recipients of divine will, but as agents of change and healing (Delgado-Yulo, 2000). In this way, the Madonna image becomes a “mask that speaks,” giving women religious a way to assert agency from within the very language and symbols of the Church (Hamington, 2014; Raphael, 2019).

The quiet radicalism in this approach lies in its subtlety because Marian imagery is so deeply normalized in the Philippine culture that its re-signification often escapes institutional scrutiny allowing sisters to infuse feminist consciousness into their work without creating conflicts in their communities. Whether working with survivors of gender-based violence, advocating for indigenous rights, or responding in disasters, using the imagery becomes a way for theological justification in their leadership and presence in spaces traditionally

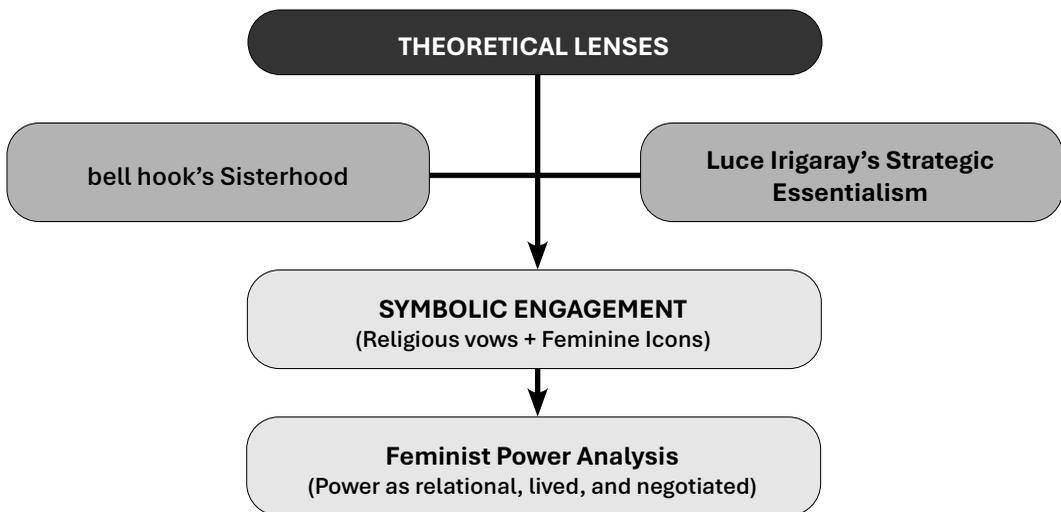
denied to women (Alarcon, 2019; Bernarte, et al., 2018; Plante, 2024). Their Marian devotion thus becomes a form of ecclesial negotiation—a practice that navigates the line between submission and resistance with theological dexterity.

Despite its significance, this practice remains largely under examined in feminist theology. The scholarly tendency to associate feminist resistance with overt rejection of traditional symbols has led to the oversight of women who work within those very frameworks to enact change. In reimagining the Madonna not as a relic of passivity but as a symbol of radical compassion and authority, Filipina sisters reveal how spiritual symbols can be mobilized toward liberatory ends. Their use of Marian imagery is not merely devotional; it is a theological act that challenges the Church's gendered hierarchies while affirming faith as a source of strength, critique, and transformation (Braidotti, 1991; Butler, 1990; Le Doeuff, 1989).

METHODOLOGY

Figure 1

Research Simulacrum



The figure above shows the research simulacrum of the study. Figure 1 illustrates the dual theoretical grounding of the study. On one branch lies the *Sisterhood* theory of bell hooks and on the other lies the *Strategic Essentialism* theory of Luce Irigaray. Together, these theories explain how feminist agency is practiced among religious sisters.

Making use of bell hooks' theory of sisterhood, this study explores how women who belong to Catholic religious congregations cultivate feminist agency within the Church's system. "Sisterhood", according to hooks (1984), is a form of political solidarity rooted in shared struggle and collective empowerment rather than uniformity of identity. *Sisterhood*, as a theory, explores the dynamics of intersectionality; the theory critiques ideological hierarchies, and advances a feminist practice that treats differences between individuals as sites of connection and political commitment (Fitts, 2011). Complementing this is Irigaray's (1985) notion of *strategic essentialism* to interpret how Catholics nuns strategically appropriate traditional feminine symbols such as the Madonna and Mary. Together, the frameworks determine how religious women reinterpret the vows and formation processes not as instruments of submission but as disciplines of self-determination and collective care, crafting solidarity from within the system of the Church, for example rather than in direct opposition to the system.

The study is grounded in qualitative feminist inquiry, designed to examine how Catholic sisters in the Philippines navigate institutional power while embodying alternative forms of personal agency. The study adopts a feminist power analysis to investigate how religious vows and formation systems shape the lived experiences of women religious. A feminist power analysis is an interpretative approach that focuses not on power as something merely held or lost, but as something lived; wherein power is something negotiated and resisted in everyday life. It centers on how individuals internalize or subvert power within gendered institutions and symbolic systems. To do this, the study draws from *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) and *critical feminist discourse analysis*, both of which prioritize reflexivity and the ethical centering of marginalized voices (Cohen et al., 2022; Lebold, 2024). These frameworks are particularly useful for understanding how religious women live out their vocations while reconfiguring the terms of femininity and devotion.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with women from active religious congregations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to reflect diverse perspectives on religious vocation and experiences within Church institutions. Through this process, the study is able to offer insight into how Catholic sisters reimagine traditional models of femininity not as passive ideals but as sources of political-spiritual transformation.

Table 1

Criteria for the Participants

Inclusion Criteria
Religious affiliation
Experience and role within their religious community
Involvement in women's advocacy
Knowledge in feminist theology

Table 2

Profile of the Participants

Codename	Affiliation	Classification	Importance	Remarks
Participant A	Augustinian	Religious	Theory-base	Expert, firsthand informant
Participant B	Maryknoll	Religious	Theory-base	Expert, firsthand informant

RESULTS

Interviews

In her youth, Participant A was an active member of the church. Her religious involvement motivated her to become a nun, a decision she made independently of her strict father who was a police officer. Despite her father's initial resistance, her conviction enabled her to continue on with her studies, and she eventually became a nun in their community. There, she was assigned to a local Catholic School where she was able to pursue her passion for education, teaching History and Social Sciences to her students and eventually was promoted as its head principal. According to her, achieving her dream of becoming an educator would have been difficult if she didn't become a nun, and spoke about the challenges of being a young woman in the 1960s, when job prospects and financial independence were difficult for women to attain.

I never wanted to marry, I saw the women around me who were neglected by their husbands. They were always crying while taking care of their children. I wanted something different for myself, I wanted to study. It was difficult back then because we lacked the money, becoming a nun made it possible for me. - Participant A

Likewise, Participant B shares a similar experience. Initially drawn to the convent by her love for music, her membership allowed her to align her passion for music with her commitment to service. She pursued her education at UST, double majoring in Music and Nursing, but was unable to complete her degree because of her personal commitments to the Church. However, it was through her education that she discovered her true calling, and it strengthened her resolve to become a nun.

I really loved playing the piano. When I learned I could play the piano inside the Church, it convinced me enough to join. I couldn't think of anything but music and studying music, fortunately, my studies were funded by my congregation. I was able to pursue a double major in Nursing and Music. - Participant B

Similar to Participant A, Participant B's decision to become a nun was not made lightly. It was directly influenced by the conditions of women around her, whom she described were trapped in loveless marriages and are often suffering from domestic abuse. This awareness motivated her to seek alternatives that would allow her to pursue her passions and avoid similar constraints, elaborating on how she could not identify with the role of a wife and a partner. Through embracing religious life, she was able to follow her musical passion, eventually assigned for missionary work in Taiwan where she spent 28 years teaching music to indigenous peoples and occasionally playing for different Churches. Simultaneously, she also studied multiple languages to complement her missionary work and was funded by the congregation.

I didn't want to marry because the idea didn't appeal to me when I observed the married women around me. They are stuck inside their houses, sometimes their husbands leave them, some are beaten up. It was misfortune, women had a hard time back then. For me, I only ever wanted to play the piano everyday and learn about musical instruments. I didn't regret becoming a nun because I can play the piano everyday, it made me and God happy. It gave me freedom. - Participant B

For both Participant A and Participant B, their religious vocations, which enabled them to pursue their personal passions, gave them both personal and spiritual satisfaction. Moreover, they continue to provide service in their community by giving scholarship grants and financial aid for students who need financial support in their education. Honoring Augustinian values of education, Participant A shared how her congregation provides

vocational courses and educational training to women and how they utilize their schools to provide refuge for displaced residents caused by natural disasters. Likewise, Participant B shared how her congregation curates livelihood training for the victims of domestic abuse to provide employment and provide counselling services to rehabilitate traumatized victims of abuse before they reintegrate in society.

The personal journeys of Participant A and Participant B reveal how faith and aspirations converge in shaping their paths. Both women cultivated their personal growth by aligning their spiritual commitments with their goals and drawing strength from the support of their congregations.

As nuns, they possess a distinct authority that sets them apart from other women propping them as moral advocates in society. This distinction empowers their engagement in socio-political causes. For Participant A, activism is a defining element of her experience. She recalls her participation in rallies and her collaboration with diverse networks of women religious with passion, detailing her moments with the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, Benedictine Sisters, and fellow Augustinian Sisters. She highlights the collective courage of these women, referring to the militant and fearless activists as the "Balisong" women. Drawing from her lived experience during Martial Law, Participant A also reflects on the distinct ways nuns were treated and the experiences that further shaped her resolve and identity as a religious woman committed to social change.

The soldiers couldn't treat us as harshly as they would to civilians. When soldiers threatened us, they themselves couldn't act harshly. We were instructed formally because they saw us as "Katawang Diyos", an extension of God. - Participant A

According to Participant A, she and her fellow nuns stood their ground during firefights and held a rosary rally to counter the military's urge to fire at protesters, citing that this encounter discouraged the military's tendency to shoot at protestors. In Mendiola, during the final days of Martial Law, when they were threatened with arrest and relocation by the military and the police, they were not strictly detained or transported due to their status as divine figures belonging to the Church. When their establishments were surrounded, to de-escalate aggression within the area and guarantee the safety of other civilians, they distributed food to both military personnel and civilians. She explicitly referred to themselves as "katawang Diyos" to explain their divine privilege. Her experience shows how nuns, through their faith and courage, positioned themselves as mediators, using prayers as shields against aggression.

Participant B, who spent most of her life overseas, shared her commitment to advocacy through musical education, particularly her experience working with the indigenous peoples and foreign nationals. She shared how she was engaged in women's issues such as

femicide and violence against women; and her involvement in livelihood and educational programs where she taught about gender equality. While sharing, she often drew parallels between her faith, the equal status of women and men, and referenced figures like Mary Magdalene to point out how women have historically held significant roles in spiritual context.

I mostly taught music to the aboriginals, but I also preached occasionally to people to promote equality as stated in our spiritual teachings. Gender equality for me is respect, like how Mary Magdalene was a woman disciple, therefore women have a place in society like men do. - Participant B

When asked about how the teachings and values of their respective congregations influenced the role of women, Participant A expressed strong convictions in activism and social awareness, citing the Augustinian values of freedom, hierarchy of love, and devotion to study and wisdom. She comments that women can pursue a different form of care and devotion beyond motherhood by engaging in community service or standing in solidarity with the marginalized, as these are also forms of Godly love. Although she clarifies her preference for educational pursuits, she acknowledges the necessity of engaging in activism. For her, education is a good alternative because it fosters personal growth, while activism encourages a stronger social consciousness that helps women explore their personal capacities.

A woman doesn't need to be just a mother, it's not her principal focus, there's more to life than motherhood. Forcing women to do what they don't want to do and depriving them of their autonomy isn't something that is right. Studying is good, activism is good because it helps you be aware of your surroundings. - Participant A

Participant A also explained that faith helped her understand the value of respect, particularly when faced with differences and difficult situations. She explained that dealing with diversity is part of embodying God's will, and she modeled herself with this love to bridge differences. Participant B, an admirer of Mary Magdalene's teachings, shared how her faith helped her understand the importance of equality, citing the values of Maryknoll in charity work and intercultural immersion. She believes that every person has the potential to be of service to others and to bring happiness through their identity. She fondly recalls moments of laughter shared with the aboriginals.

I believe in equality. Whether man or woman, we have the capacity to be of service to others just like Magdalene who was a great disciple. My life, I made people happy through music. I enjoyed my life. - Participant B

Participant A and Participant B also shared their thoughts about sisterhood, and both agreed that while there are differences in ideologies, advocacy work becomes easier to achieve because everyone works together as one. Their differences are overridden by their

vowed commitments, strengthening collaboration and cooperation. For instance, Participant A spoke about her experience collaborating with Japanese nuns, where they struggled with communication and cultural differences, but their commitment to their vows of service and hospitality helped them unify under one cause. Similarly, Participant B spoke about her collaboration with Protestant churches and other Pagan organizations. Noting how, despite the difference in ideologies, women within these spiritual groups find common ground through their shared commitment to serving the divine and their community.

DISCUSSION

Vocation and Formation

The narratives of the participants reveal a vocation molded not by rigid institutional structures but by discernment rooted in conviction and ethics. Instead of following the traditional path of a domestic life as a mother and as a housewife, their entry into religious life represents an act of self-determination to spiritual aspiration. To illustrate, Participant A recalled how witnessing the suffering of women in her community, especially in marriage, led her to reject that life for herself. This particular aspect of spiritual aspiration becomes a catalyst for a societal revolution, one that ascertains contradiction to a particular norm or social construct. In the immersion into such a specific mode of life, such is initiating a mechanism to go against the tendency. In this light, the tendency of the status quo serves as the object upon which the individual wages a revolution. This is not merely for ego or having asserted one's autonomy but rather a reimagination of a reified context of subjectivity. Her choice to become a sister emerged not as an escape but as a conscious pursuit of education and moral purpose. Vocation, in this circumstance, does not reflect retreat from the world; it is about embracing womanhood on her own terms as guided by inner conviction rather than external expectations.

Even though Catholic teachings continue to reinforce conservative gender ideals, the sisters' lived experiences point to how religious life paradoxically opens space for personal freedom and public service. Religious congregations provide women with platforms to shape their communities and take on leadership roles, fostering autonomy in the process (Doce, 2019; Santiago, 1995; Leming, 2000; Aguja, 2013; Barry, 2014). This resonates with Agadjanian and Yabiku's (2015) observation that women in religious life do not reject traditional spaces but redefine them. For the participants, choosing the veil becomes a form of gendered resistance as it allows them to subvert societal expectations of marriage and family life while taking on a role that is socially respected and spiritually valid.

The act of claiming religious identity in this particularity echoes bell hooks' theory of feminist consciousness, not merely as ideological opposition but as a reclamation of self. In

this theory, hooks contends that true sisterhood emerges through self-definition, especially when it honors diversity and resists the hierarchies imposed along racial and class lines. In the stories of these sisters, choosing religious life becomes an assertion of voice and agency. The decision to live a vowed life is not a rejection of the world but a conscious engagement with it, offering an alternative moral path that challenges patriarchy from within the very systems that uphold it. The continuous imposition of said challenges connotes a certain manifestation of treating such decisions not just mere volitions of oneself but rather a spirit that is alive, a *geist* in the Hegelian discussion. One that asserts that these challenges are not just simple assumptions or banal and organizational movements but rather one that seeks to recognize the essence of womanhood.

When viewed through this lens, the choice to enter religious life holds both spiritual and political significance. *Perfectae Caritatis* affirms that vocation must be embraced “in freedom and generosity,” not through societal obligation or pressure. *Ratio Institutionis* likewise understands formation as a journey of spiritual maturation and ethical responsibility. Schneiders (2000) further frames religious life not as role-performance but as a personal transformation rooted in discerning one’s deepest commitments. The sisters’ narratives reflect this: formation, for them, was not a passive training ground but a space of interior awakening and thus a preparation not for subordination but for action.

In this light, vocation becomes both a spiritual calling and a feminist gesture. It is chosen with clarity and carried with purpose. This ethical and spiritual grounding lays the foundation for how sisters embody the vows of religious life, which the following section now turns to examine.

Reinterpreting Vows

The reflections of the nuns reveal that the traditional vows of religious life—poverty, chastity, and obedience—are not static declarations but dynamic ethical commitments. Far from signaling renunciation or repression, the vows are reinterpreted by the participants as grounded forms of justice and moral clarity. Their narratives suggest that the vows are not merely internalized; they are performed in the world as spiritual responses to systemic suffering and as intentional acts of solidarity with the vulnerable. Within their congregational and ministerial contexts, these vows become both relational and political: they shape not only how sisters live but how they resist.

On poverty

Participant A interpreted her vow of poverty not as ascetic deprivation but as material and emotional availability to people in need of material things. In her experience, poverty

is lived not as personal lack, but as ethical proximity to those in need. This understanding resonates with the Church's own teaching in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine which describes poverty as a practice of solidarity with the marginalized. Rather than framing her vow as individual sacrifice, she enacts it as a structural disruption in that she channels resources toward the vulnerable. This act embodies what feminist theologians describe as a shift from charity to justice or the reorientation of self, not away from the world but deeper into its wounds.

On chastity

Participant B's account of finding joy in her music, her ministry, and her "freedom" suggests that chastity, too, is not experienced as repression. Instead, it becomes a form of radical presence and relational integrity. In refusing marriage not out of fear but desire to be available to "God's people", she models what Sandra Schneiders describes as relational chastity, which is not the absence of intimacy but its redistribution. This is echoed in *Evangelica Testificatio*, which reminds us that chastity must "free the heart" rather than constrain the self. Her vow is not a denial of desire but a reordering of desire toward the good of others.

On obedience

Of the three vows, obedience is the most contested, and yet the participants articulate it as a vow of active listening to conscience and not passive submission. Participant A described how during Martial Law, she disobeyed institutional instructions to remain quiet, choosing instead to act in solidarity with the victims. Her interpretation of the value of obedience aligns with *Evangelica Testificatio*, in that religious obedience is a "free and responsible" commitment to truth, not a blind subjection to authority (Citation dito ng *Evangelica Testificatio*). This understanding also draws from feminist theology's reinterpretation of obedience as faithful resistance or the refusal to remain complicit when injustice demands moral response.

The participants do not merely internalize the vows; they embody them in context and thus transform each into a daily act of ethical witness. Their practices reflect not only faithfulness to tradition but a reinvention of that tradition from within. Through solidarity, these sisters articulate a religious identity that is not passively compliant but is consecrated in conscientious acts. The vows professed and lived out by the religious women become an integrated ethic rooted in spiritual vocation, yet still deeply feminist in its attention to power and social justice. This vowed identity provides the moral and symbolic ground upon which their sacred feminine leadership emerges as explored in the next section.

Sacred Symbols and Sisterhood

The usage of spiritual symbols in the form of the Madonna and of Mary reveal a thoughtful and strategic reimagining of traditional religious figures. While Church tradition has often framed these icons within essentialized frames of purity and obedience, the sisters have reworked them into sources of authority. In this pursuit, they have grounded their moral voice and shaped a form of leadership that is both spiritual and embodied. The usage of spiritual symbols becomes a tactical language readily recognized by communities and institutions that allow the sisters to navigate and act within conservative and patriarchal religious landscapes.

Participant A described how, during periods of political violence, her visible role as a religious sister, dressed in habit and carrying the rosary, allowed her to offer refuge and engage in advocacy without direct repression from authorities. She emphasized, “They knew we were ‘*katawang Diyos*’ [embodied of God]—they couldn’t treat us like others.” This sacred embodiment of the feminine, mediated through Marian symbolism then becomes a shield of moral legitimacy, allowing her to transgress boundaries of silence and protection. This reflects what Irigaray (1985) calls strategic essentialism, where women tactically inhabit essentialized roles not to affirm them but to gain symbolic power within systems that would otherwise marginalize them. Mary, in this context, is not only a mother but a protector and a moral anchor.

In a different context, Participant B invoked Mary Magdalene to explain the need to teach gender equality and reclaim the authority of women’s voices in the Church. She referred to Magdalene not as a repentant sinner, but as “a great disciple equal to the apostles.” Her reinterpretation challenges dominant ecclesial narratives and asserts the presence of biblical feminine leadership that is often erased. Feminist theologians such as Grey (1999) and Fiorenza (1997) have long argued for a reevaluation of the iconic Mary Magdalene not as an object of redemption but as a subject of proclamation. Through this lens, nuns do not abandon tradition; they return to it with a new purpose.

In invoking the images of the Madonna, Mary Magdalene, and the bonds of *sisterhood*, the participants assert a model of religious femininity that is neither ornamental nor submissive. It is deeply symbolic, intentionally strategic, and fully embodied. By inhabiting sacred archetypes, they transform what were once imposed images into cultural icons of protection and prophetic voice. This embodiment of the sacred feminine is not merely symbolic but a form of theological praxis that remains rooted in Catholic tradition while carrying the force of feminist agency. Their vocation becomes more than a spiritual path; it is also a continual negotiation with structures of power and meaning.

This reimagining of feminine spirituality also shapes how the sisters engage in the world beyond their religious communities. Both participants spoke of collaborations with non-Catholics, including Protestants, indigenous leaders, and even followers of folk religion. These alliances were not framed as compromises but as expressions of what bell hooks calls sisterhood across difference. A radical solidarity is rooted in shared ethical commitments rather than institutional uniformity. In this way, the sisters' devotion to sacred feminine figures becomes not only theological but relational as it guides their moral practice and shapes how they build bridges across communities and political ideologies.

CONCLUSION

This study has reexamined the role of Philippine Catholic nuns as moral agents whose religious identity shapes their religious lives through discernment and grounded feminist spirituality. The participants' narratives reveal that vocation emerges not from duty handed down by the Church hierarchy, but from a call within, a personal and theological decision that pushes back against narrow ideas of womanhood. Through their stories, religious life appears not as a retreat from society but as agency toward self-determination and social justice.

Rather than viewing religious formation as a form of indoctrination, the sisters articulate their experience as a lifetime process of ethical awakening where spiritual discipline meets critical consciousness. For nuns, the vows are not abstract ideals or rules to obey but living commitments: poverty as solidarity, chastity as freedom, obedience as conscience. These reimagined meanings disrupt traditional notions of religious submission and reflect not only fidelity to tradition but a conscious shaping of religious life into a space for moral action and gendered resistance.

The sacred feminine, imagined through Mary and Mary Magdalene, emerges as a powerful source of meaning in their theology. These icons are not simply inherited; they are reclaimed. In invoking the Madonna as protector and Magdalene as disciple, the sisters reframe spiritual womanhood as embodied and relational. Their voices suggest that devotion can function as resistance and that religious language itself may serve as a resource for reclaiming theological authority.

Collectively, these insights challenge the tendency to analyze religious life solely through institutional frameworks. In recollection, the sisters position the convent as a site of spiritual agency and feminist reimagination. The sisters do not reject the structures they inherit; they reinterpret them. Their vocation unfolds as a form of resistance that does not oppose faith but deepens it. In doing so, they expand the meaning of feminist spirituality, offering models of transformation rooted not in opposition of the Church, but in continuous vow, presence, and discernment.

While this study provides a close reading of monastic life, it remains limited by its cultural and religious scope. The small number of participants reflects a depth-focused approach but future studies might widen the lens through inter-congregational, interreligious, or cross-cultural comparisons between localities or nationalities and include more diverse age groups and social backgrounds, which could also illuminate how religious identity changes across generations and geopolitical contexts. Such inquiries may enrich the evolving discourse on feminist theologies by grounding them in lived, everyday practices of resistance and renewal. This will further explore how women's religious spaces possess agency not despite faith, but through faith.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ariane Shelley Q. Pepito is a graduate holding a bachelor's degree in political science from Colegio de San Juan de Letran-Manila. Her passions involve gender research, political philosophy, arts, and law. She was a former House of Representatives intern and is currently working part-time as a news writer and full-time as a contracts associate. She is eager to contribute to the selected fields of her passions and aims to be a part of a dynamic and innovative legal or academic research team in the future.