

M. Ibita

Prof. Ma. M. Ibita, De la Salle University, Philippines/ KU Leuven, Belgium.
E-mail: ma.marilou.ibita@dlsu.edu.ph,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2072-3375>

M.S. Ibita

Prof. Ma. M.S. Ibita, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines.
E-mail: mibita@ateneo.edu,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8437-4194>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v35i1.6375>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023

Supp 35:180-199

Date received:

26 May 2022

Date accepted:

8 December 2022

Date published:

26 April 2023

#Choosetochallenge: Covid-19, community research, and the Canaanite woman

ABSTRACT

This study theologises on the Urban Poor Women and Children with Academics for Reaching and Delivering on UNSDGs in the Philippines (UPWARD-UP) Project research team's collaboration with the Alliance of Peoples' Organisation Along the Manggahan Floodway (Alliance), Philippines. We posit that the theological process of see-judge-act, enhanced with evaluate-celebrate/ritualise, using feminist biblical characterisation in interpreting Matthew 15:21-28, serves as a spiritual resource for Christians working for the urban poor realisation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The Canaanite woman challenged Jesus' identity and mission impacting on Christology and ecclesiology. This characterisation makes her a vital example and companion for the Alliance women leaders in achieving their prioritised SDGs (1 - No Poverty; 3 - Health and Well-being [in relation with the Environment]; 4 - Quality Education, and 16 - Justice, Peace and Strong Institutions seen from the lens of UNSDG 5 - Gender Equality) during the pandemic and beyond.



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



1. INTRODUCTION

A challenged world is an alert world. Individually, we're all responsible for our own thoughts and actions – all day, every day.

We can all choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality. We

can all choose to seek out and celebrate women's achievements. Collectively, we can all help create an inclusive world.

From challenge comes change, so let's all choose to challenge.

This was the theme of the 2021 International Women's Day, abbreviated as #ChoosetoChallenge (Chan 2021). Alertness is a vital attitude especially as the world faces the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of its toll on human lives and healthcare,¹ global economy (Jones *et al.* 2021), as well as politics and governance (Landwehr & Schäfer 2020). While it is alarming that authoritarian regimes tightened their grip on power, Wittenberg-Cox (2020) notes that the countries that were able to manage the pandemic better were governed by women: Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. Zenger and Folkman's (2020) study indicates that respondents valued the interpersonal skills of women leaders during the pandemic such as the ability to inspire and motivate, to communicate powerfully, to work as a team and collaborate, and to build relationships, since these characteristics resonate with followers who were feeling fearful, concerned for well-being, and confident in the plans they made. Their respondents highlighted that during the pandemic, they want leaders

who are able to pivot and learn new skills; who emphasize employee development even when times are tough; who display honesty and integrity; and who are sensitive and understanding of the stress, anxiety, and frustration that people are feeling (Zenger and Folkman, 7/8).

and that most of these traits are present in women leaders.

COVID-19 already caused a general decline in global human development for the first time since 1990. The April 2020 UN Policy Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women warned about its exacerbated impact on economics, health, and gender-based violence (Guterres 2020; United Nations 2020; United Nations Development Program 2020). Immediate, intermediate, and long-term responses to the complex aftermath of the pandemic also necessitate the convergence of multiple disciplines. Choi and Pak (2006) offer helpful definitions of these kinds of research, services, education, and policy. For them, a multidisciplinary study draws insights from various disciplines but remains within its own boundaries. Interdisciplinary work "analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole" (Choi & Pak 2006: PMID: 17330451).

1 The Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), COVID-19 Dashboard – Global Map, Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

Transdisciplinary collaboration “integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries”. When the nature of involvement of various disciplines is unspecified, they suggest calling the teamwork “multiple disciplinary” (Choi & Pak 2006: PMID: 17330451). As biblical scholars, we collaborate with academic colleagues from theology, sociology, journalism, and law on the Urban Poor Women and Children with Academics for Reaching and Delivering on UNSDGs in the Philippines (hereafter, UPWARD-UP) project and we all work with an urban poor community for a transdisciplinary and multisectoral research. From the perspective of our biblical research, what can we contribute from theology to achieve the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter, UNSDG), given the challenges of the pandemic? In this article, we posit that the theological processes of *see-judge-act-evaluate-celebrate/ritualise*, using feminist biblical characterisation in interpreting Matthew 15:21-28, can serve as spiritual resources for Christians who work with the urban poor communities’ realisation of the UNSDGs during and post-pandemic.

This study accentuates the importance to knowledge generation of listening to urban poor women on the ground and of putting gender equality and women’s rights at the centre of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts, as manifested by the realisation of the UNSDGs and viewed from a biblical-theological perspective, using the modified 5-step theological-pastoral cycle. This conceptual approach on theologising about the complex issue of sustainable development in an urban poor women’s community setting follows the classic steps of *see* (the experienced reality), *judge* (social analysis and biblical-theological reflection), and *act* (sharing a simple and critical biblical interpretation method) (Sands 2018). In this investigation, however, we include two further steps: *evaluate* (assess the effectivity of the action) and *celebrate/ritualise* (integrative and transformative communal activities) (Ibita, M.M. 2021:47-70, 49-50). The impact of this 5-step approach cyclically leads to new realities for the community in attaining the UNSDGs.

In this transdisciplinary and multi-sectoral study conceived with the stakeholders in 2019, approved for implementation in 2020, and extended until 2022, the *see* section comprises the health and socio-economic issues that urban poor women experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the *judge* section, we underline the importance of the socio-economic basis of the UNSDGs and of including biblical-theological-spirituality insights about them in dialogue with the women’s experience. In the *act* section, while our transdisciplinary UPWARD-UP project helps them, in many ways, promote their advocacies such as building their

own website to display their UNSDG actions, we focus on our unique contribution to liberating actions as biblical scholars, by sharing skills on how to interpret the story of the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28) from the intersection of narrative and feminist perspectives. This can inspire them to realise how they have already collectively acted like the Canaanite woman when they gathered themselves as a peoples' organisation to fight for their housing rights, and how they continue to do so. They persistently respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and sustain their other pre-pandemic advocacies in the Canaanite woman-like manner. The *evaluate* section assesses the possible impact of this way of understanding the Scriptures and how spirituality can be a resource in advocacy works, especially in attaining the UNSDGs. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we offer the *ritualise* section as an integrating activity for the community and other stakeholders of the UPWARD-UP Project.

2. SEE: PANDEMIC CHALLENGES AND THE URBAN POOR WOMEN

Why are they so emotional nowadays? This was a silent question we asked ourselves while we were discussing “What’s Next: COVID-19, Community Academic Collaborative Research and UNSDGs” at the virtual discussion *Talakayang Alay sa Bayan* (Forum for the Nation), an alternative class for the students of the Ateneo de Manila University, 4 March 2021. In this context, “we” refers to us, academic researchers of UPWARD-UP, who organised the virtual event. “They” refers to some leaders and members of the Alliance of Peoples’ Organisation Along the Manggahan Floodway,² who shared how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as an urban poor community in the nation’s capital. Several community members lost their jobs; they struggle with online basic education of the children, and they continue to engage the responsible government offices to respond to the utility issues such as water and a better sewerage system in their urban poor housing complex, as they face the threats of flooding, eviction, and relocation amidst the pandemic (Chorover & Arriens 2020).

The 2021 International Women’s Day theme was #ChoosetoChallenge. The Alliance community’s core narrative is a communal #ChooseToChallenge story (Mawis 2018). The community is an organisation of the residents along the danger zone of the banks of Manggahan River in Pasig City, Philippines. According to the Alliance’s retelling, back in 2009, their houses were severely damaged by typhoon Ketsana/Ondoy and they were

2 They abbreviate their group as APOAMF (hereafter, Alliance).

prohibited from returning to their homes. Since the relocation offer was far from their jobs and the utilities were not good, the community formed the Alliance to legally seek in-city housing. Through the help of non-government organisations, especially the Community Organisers Multiversity (COM), the people were united and encouraged to forge together their individual and communal dreams. They explored how they could realise their visions and negotiated with government and non-government organisations on how they could turn their in-city urban poor housing dreams into reality. They sought government-owned land, secured initial funding and resources to finance the project, and continuously dialogued with the government and other stakeholders to avoid violence and iron-out differences. They call this common vision and participative planning and strategies the “People’s Plan”:

...the People’s Plan is effective because all needs are taken into consideration in the planning process.

Limitations of the project and responsibilities of intended users are also made clear to those involved. Though there is no guarantee to the success of the endeavor, there is an attempt to accommodate everyone’s needs throughout its development (Mawis 2018:n.p.).

In 2019, when our group of academic researchers were deliberating on which community to work with in the quest for realising the UNSDGs, especially with women leaders, the success of the Alliance community inspired us to partner with them for our UPWARD-UP Project with the Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (Flemish Interuniversities Council) – Universitaire Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (University Development Co-operation) or VLIR-UOS. UPWARD-UP generally aims

to develop and empower urban poor communities to integrate the UNSDG agenda into their local environment through a transdisciplinary learning program employing knowledge-sharing and skills development with a gender lens.³

3 This information is from the approved grant proposal of UPWARD-UP with VLIR-UOS, with project number PH2020SIN294A101 and runs from January 2020 to December 2021, and was extended to 31 August 2022, due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The members of the Academic Team from the Philippines are from the Department of Theology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, the Asian Center for Journalism, and the Ateneo Human Rights Center of the Ateneo de Manila University, St. Vincent School of Theology-Adamson University, and the Department of Theology and Religious Education, De la Salle University, while those from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium are from the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Leuven Institute of Criminology (LINC) and Faculty of Law, and from the Institute for

More specifically, it endeavours to facilitate dialogue and to document the dynamic exchange between the Alliance community, COM, and the university stakeholders, using multi-media platforms to prioritise, monitor, and evaluate how the UNSDGs are concretely achieved in the community through a gender-aware, transdisciplinary, multi-modal learning programme that synergises and integrates the knowledge generated by the urban poor women into academic discussion. The academic partners use online learning to equip the community with the knowledge and skills necessary to concretise SDG prioritising, monitoring, and evaluation in grassroots and academic communities.

At the stakeholders' meeting on 19 February 2021, the Alliance community decided to prioritise the following UNSDGs, using Goal 5 or gender equality as lens: 1 - No Poverty; 3 - Health and Well-being (in relation with the Environment); 4 - Quality Education, and 16 - Justice, Peace and Strong Institutions. As members of this transdisciplinary research and focusing on our contribution as biblical scholars, we ask: How can we contribute from our discipline, namely theology, to achieve the UNSDGs, given the challenges of the pandemic? We propose that the theological process of see-judge-act-evaluate-celebrate/ritualise, using feminist biblical characterisation in interpreting Matthew 15:21-28, can serve as a spiritual resource for Christians who work for the urban poor realisation of the UNSDGs during and after the pandemic. We now turn to the judge-act steps to show this.

3. JUDGE: CHOOSING TO CHALLENGE NOW AND THEN

This “judge” section of the pastoral spiral is composed of two parts: socio-economic analysis and biblical-theological analysis. The Alliance community was chosen as the site of this UPWARD-UP partnership because of their effective organising to achieve their primary goal of finding secure and decent housing near their former degraded and dangerous settlement along the Pasig River. Their tenacity persists in dialoguing with government and non-government entities in realising the Peoples' Plan. They showed how

communities who are socially, economically and politically marginalised can actively participate in decisions about how they adapt – and remain in the neighborhoods they call home (Chorover & Arriens 2020:n.p.).

Media Studies. UPWARD-UP's latest research ethics clearance from the Ateneo de Manila University is AdMUREC_19_139CA2.

Upon completion, the housing complex will have 15 buildings with 900 units (Chorover & Arriens 2020). They now have eight 5-storey buildings with twelve units/floors that house approximately five hundred families.

However, the pandemic lockdown delayed the construction of the other buildings and hindered the Alliance's actions to improve the problematic sewerage system of the buildings and concerns with regard to water utility. Moreover, many residents, especially men, lost their jobs during the first hard lockdown in the first quarter of 2020 and the conditions have deteriorated to this day. Furthermore, the pandemic has magnified the burden of women at home because they have to augment or budget their meagre resources. As they prioritised food provision, they were not able to allot money for other important needs such as paying for the utilities, amortisation, social security contributions such as Philhealth, the Social Security System, and PAG-IBIG (Housing) Fund. The shift to online education meant allotting extra money to acquire gadgets such as cellular phones or tablets and to pay for internet subscriptions, in addition to the added burden of the women to tutor children at home.

At the abovementioned Forum, their uneasiness and emotive sharing were prompted by the discovery that nine people belonging to one family and some of their relatives had tested positive for COVID-19. The Alliance leaders who were our guests had to act swiftly to contain the outbreak and ensure that basic necessities were also provided for those affected. In general, this situation at the Alliance mirrors how the Philippine government's highly militarised approach to the pandemic made life more volatile, uncertain, and complex for many people, especially those living at the margins of society. In particular, this condition shows how women are at the forefront of the complex challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Alliance women chose to challenge the seeming impossibilities before them by working for the realisation of the UNSDGs amidst the pandemic.

As biblical scholars, we now elaborate on our "judge" step by providing some insights from biblical-theological-spirituality standpoints. From the perspective of theology, the dynamic between religion and development is not a new research topic, as noted in Swart and Nell's (2016) latest list of literature in this field. At the time of writing (end of August 2021), however, a Google Scholar search on more scientific studies on "UNSDG, religion" yielded only 421 in 0.2 seconds; "UNSDG, spirituality" generated 167 in 0.3 seconds; "UNSDG, theology" listed 38 results in 0.3 seconds; "UNSDG, Bible" showed only 33 in 0.04 seconds, and "UNSDG, Catholic church" generated 26 results in 0.03 seconds. A scrutiny of these lists shows even less relevant materials on the topic. Hintjens (1997) rightly states that it is particularly important to ask the most obvious question: What does God

has to do with sustainable development? Downing (2016) offers a brief reflection on the biblical-theological roots of the UNSDGs. Leininger and Striebinger (2016) emphasise the importance of cooperating with religious actors in achieving the UNSDGs. While Ajayi's (2019) study focuses on the role of religious non-government organisations in achieving ecological sustainability in a limited way, Nilsen (2020) asks relevant questions on a broader discussion on biblical ecological hermeneutics, by using the UNSDGs. We do not have access yet to Cichos *et al.*'s (2021) latest book entitled *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church* that explores the consistencies and disparities between Catholic Social Teachings and each of the UNSDGs and the collaborations taking place in the various goals. Nevertheless, we affirm that achieving these goals remains the litmus test of building back better globally in this pandemic and that a contextual, integrated, inclusive and transformative reading of the Biblical texts is vital in this task (Ibita 2021:135-165). How do we concretise this kind of biblical reading?

In this section of the study, we highlight the role of theology and biblical characters in recognising the role of women in achieving the UNSDGs, especially in building back better during the COVID-19 pandemic. To strengthen the focus on sustainability and the Alliance women's identification with the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28) and her interesting encounter with Jesus, it is necessary to equip them with simple yet solid skills in enhancing their reading, understanding, and interpretation of biblical texts through feminist biblical characterisation.

Considering the scope of this article, we focus on a synchronic biblical interpretation of Matthew 15:21-28 to theologise on the experience of the Alliance community. Given the programme of the UPWARD-UP, it has not yet been possible to hold a face-to-face session with the Alliance participants. However, we use this story to reflect on what they have been doing so far in view of COVID-19 and the UNSDGs. Theologian and storyteller Megan McKenna (1994:225) suggests three initial inviting questions for readers of stories, including biblical ones:

1. The question "How do you feel?" allows the listeners to get in touch with their personal response to the story.
2. "What is true in the story?" helps discern universal truths in the story.
3. "What is disturbing in the story?" facilitates critical engagement with the story and allows for alternative insights to come up.

In this paper, we focus more on the disturbing part of the story – the seeming insult of Jesus to the Canaanite woman and the woman's audacity to challenge Jesus, in order to achieve her aim. On other occasions when this

story was told, the reaction to this passage ranged from the acceptance of Jesus' initial marginalising response against the Canaanite woman simply because he happens to be Jesus with the freedom to do according to his justification to a response that expressed being disturbed by the way in which Jesus discriminates against the woman. Considering the Canaanite woman, the spectrum of responses also moves from criticisms of her actions that dare to challenge Jesus to one that cheers her persistence to achieve her goal of getting her daughter healed.

We employ narrative criticism to allow the readers to engage deeply with the narrative world of the story and its values (Corley 2000:8), its plot and setting, and its characters. We can do this by modifying Rhoads' (1982:417) questions on characterisation and drawing from them some observations about the characters, with the Canaanite woman as the central focus.

1. What does the character say?
2. What does the character do?
3. What do other actors say to, about, or against the focus character?
4. What do other actors do to, for, or against the focus character?

These questions easily scrutinise the words and actions of the characters and show the dynamics operative in the story. The responses gathered from the participants can be enriched by the facilitator's provision of insights from contextual approaches to the Bible such as liberationist and feminist readings. These readings ask whether there are marginalised characters in the text; if there are women actors in the story, and how these women are portrayed in that literary portion, biblical book, or the entire Bible (Corley 2000:12-14).

We now characterise the Canaanite woman who chose to challenge Jesus and ascertain how she can accompany our Alliance women in the quest for sustainable development.

4. ACT: DARING TO CHALLENGE LIKE THE CANAANITE WOMAN

Context is very important in deep diving with our "act" step. As we focus on the words and actions of the Canaanite woman, we realise how the historical and literary contexts of the story make the narrative a dare-to-challenge story. Matthew's Gospel tells the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman within the context of the Roman Empire, where most

people lived in poverty and unhealthy circumstances (Carter 2001:72). As Carter (2001:107) points out, social conflicts are told in the Gospels as stories of “alien invading and controlling powers”, so that the healing miracles are expressions of “resistance to and liberation from imperial control”. The story of the Canaanite woman is found in the section of the Matthean exposition on the Christology and Ecclesiology of the gospel (Mt. 13:53-18:35) (Brown 2016:59). It is literarily bordered by spatial references. Jesus is on the road from Gennesaret, where he did many healings, even those who touched the fringes of his cloak (Mt. 14:34-36), to the district of Tyre and Sidon (Mt. 15:21), and finally passing through the Sea of Galilee before going up the mountain, where he again healed many and where the miracle of the seven loaves and few fishes fed “four thousand men, not counting women and children” (Mt. 15:29-38). How did the Canaanite woman challenge the prevailing mentality of the time and succeed in being heard, counted, and getting her daughter healed? Let us recall Matthew’s story (Mt. 15:21-28):

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly (*New Revised Standard Version Bible [NRSV, 1989]*).

Here are some of the explicit observations for discussion with the community.

The words of the Canaanite woman reveal how she acknowledges that Jesus is a Jew and the promised Lord from the line of David, and how clear she is in her desire: requesting the healing of her daughter who was tormented by a demon (Mt. 15:22). Moreover, she also intensifies her request: from asking that Jesus may pity her (inner disposition) (Mt. 15:22) to asking that Jesus should help (outward manifestation of will) her (Mt. 15:25). She does not falter in her recognition of Jesus as “Lord” and, while she acknowledges her cultural status as an outsider (Yes, Lord, yet...; Mt. 15:27), she also capitalises on the cultural dynamic of challenge and riposte and beats Jesus in his own game. However, Gullotta (2014:335)

maintains that throughout the story, Jesus remains in a position of power (see also Pilch 2020).

These observations on the words of the woman are complemented by her intersectional identity. She is a “Canaanite”, a female, a mother, an active rather than a passive actor, with a voice in the narrative rather than being merely described, and she pursues Jesus in the region of Tyre and Sidon, without any male advocate and despite the dismissal by the disciples and Jesus himself.⁴ Her clever retort, which consistently addresses Jesus as Lord, even emphasises that

The table belongs to the dogs’ *lords*; thus, if this woman or her child is a ‘dog’, then they have access to anything that falls from the table of their Lord (Lyons-Pardue 2019:242).

This Matthean detail contrasts with Mark’s story where the crumbs only come from the children (Mark 7:28; see Mt. 15:27) (Lyons-Pardue 2019:242). She is, indeed, a foreigner racially, ethnically, geographically, and religiously, but she does not allow the seeming dismissal of the disciples and Jesus to distract her from her mission on her daughter’s behalf (Rubano 2016:829, 830).

In terms of the actions of the Canaanite woman, she was well-aware of who Jesus was. Had she already heard a great deal about him? While Jesus was an outsider in Tyre and Sidon, the woman’s gesture described as *προσεκύνει* physically shows the power imbalance and aggravates the dismissive canine comparison, as it could also evoke the submissiveness of a dog (Gullotta 2014:334). But the woman was able to tweak it to her advantage. Later, this same verb describes the disciples’ worship of the Risen Jesus in the great commissioning (Mt. 28:18).

The dismissal of the disciples and the double rejection by Jesus of the Canaanite woman intensifies the narrative tension and appeals to the readers’ identification with the woman (Gullotta 2014:332). However, the resolve of the woman drives the dynamics of the distant healing story. It is reminiscent of the stories in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10 of a master pleading for his servant, and of a royal official in John 4:46-54 who appealed for his son. In John, the involved characters are all male; they are both status holders (royal official and healer); there is no pleading between them, and no dismissal from the disciples. In Matthew 8:5-13, the Capernaum centurion just informs Jesus that his servant (*παῖς*) was paralysed and is suffering terribly, and Jesus volunteered to come and heal him. The centurion declined Jesus’ visit and expressed his belief in Jesus’ words. However, the story of the Canaanite woman is more powerful

4 On intersectionality, see Glancy (2010); Lyons-Pardue (2019:247).

because she is able to overcome the power discrepancies between them (male-female, insider-outsider, well-known healer-woman without status) and achieve her purpose by engaging and overcoming the obstacles.

The Canaanite woman chose to challenge Jesus' use of the dog metaphor. In her response in Matthew 15:27, the dog feeding from the master's table is different from the children's crumbs in Mark 7:29. Accordingly, "dogs, in the culture of the time, were carrion-eating scavengers", and thus comparing the woman and her child with dogs appears to be an intersectional slur and verbal abuse against them (Rubano 2016:830, 831). In addition, the dog metaphor can be a derogatory term for foreigners (racial slur) and prostitutes (gender defamation) (Cadwallader 2005:35.2, 35.3). In this challenge-riposte, she prevails over Jesus. Jesus left no ambiguity in his response: "Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'" (Mt. 15:28). This response indicates that, just as Matthew has intensified Jesus' refusal of the woman, the evangelist is ready to rebound, by emphasising Jesus' acceptance of her in more detail (Lyons-Pardue 2019:242). Moreover, while the woman framed her pleas for her daughter's healing as benefits *to herself*, "Lord, help me." (Mt. 15:25), Jesus also frames his own act of healing as benefitting the woman, "Let it be done for you as you wish" (Mt. 15:28) (Lyons-Pardue 2019:243).

Overall, the Canaanite woman engages and challenges the obstacles set before her by the disciples and Jesus on three levels. First, on the level of the Matthean Jesus, this face-to-face encounter and the woman's words changed Jesus' opinion and course of action, from the plea of the woman to the praise of Jesus and healing of her daughter. Secondly, this episode deepens the Matthean Christology of Jesus as a healer who expands his ministry geographically, ethnically, and from a gender perspective. The Canaanite woman, who chose to challenge Jesus, even challenges Matthew's tendency to "not count women and children" in Jesus' healing and feeding miracles of the five thousand men (Mt. 14:13-21) and even in the later episode of the feeding of the four thousand men (Mt. 15:30-39). Thirdly, this encounter also widens the ecclesiology of Matthew, as the Canaanite woman reminds the reader of the women outsiders in Jesus' genealogy (for example, Rahab and Ruth [Mt. 1:5]), God's salvation being extended to the gentiles. While Jesus told the disciples not to go to the gentiles earlier in the narrative (Mt. 10:5), the gentile woman was able to persuade him to change his viewpoint and mission direction (see Fander 2012). This expansive and more inclusive approach culminates in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19) (Lyons-Pardue 2019:250).

Both the passage in Matthew 15:21-28 and the suggested biblical interpretation through characterisation and from a feminist perspective show that there are two explicit women actors: the active Canaanite woman and the passive daughter who is the subject of the healing request and the ultimate achievement of healing. Matthew initially shows them to be marginalised characters by being non-Jews, women, and supplicants for healing. However, Matthew also brings these marginal characters to the centre by means of the active engagement of the Canaanite mother who chooses to challenge Jesus with her riposte. Her response turns the discriminating slur and insult into a challenge that expands the Matthean Jesus' course of action, the Christology, and ecclesiology of the Gospel of Matthew. The insights from the actions of the Canaanite woman can dialogue with and shed light on the way in which the Alliance community, particularly the women, chooses to challenge those responsible to help ease the difficulties they face, especially during the pandemic. This way of highlighting her words and actions leads to the way of being and doing, or spirituality, of tenacity for transformation.

5. EVALUATE: THE CANAANITE WOMAN, THE ALLIANCE WOMEN, AND THE UNSDGs

We understand in our characterisation and observations above how the Canaanite woman's choice to challenge and cross ethnic and gender boundaries helped secure a place for her family within Israel's unfolding history (Wainwright 2010:226) as well as the history of the followers of Jesus. Similarly, the Alliance women also choose to challenge the bureaucratic government boundaries to secure a safe place and housing for their families and unfold their own history as a community. Their community leadership, mostly composed of women, is very eager to learn ways in which their families and community can thrive and achieve their prioritised UNSDGs. This opportunity also enabled our academic team to better understand and serve the needs and aspirations of our community partners. Because of this openness to teaching and learning, the Alliance women have been able to increasingly use the language of sustainability for their own advocacies.

Below, we show how the Canaanite woman's spirituality of tenacity for transformation can be a companion of the Alliance in their advocacies. In our Annual Report for VLIR-UOS, their synergy with the village/barangay and city government and various NGOs, with whom they are working, allowed them to confront and challenge the difficulties that come their way

and articulate how they are building back better, using their four priority UNSDGs with a gender perspective.

As noted earlier, New Testament characters such as Jesus and the Canaanite woman lived under the conditions of the Roman empire, where poverty abounded. For the Alliance, they choose to challenge their urban poor community context to achieve UNSDG 1 - No Poverty. They overcame the difficulties and managed to access the government's pandemic help for displaced workers last September 2020. They also facilitated the distribution of the government's financial assistance during the repeated lockdowns. They sewed face masks and sold them to augment their income and respond to the health crisis. Due to the financial strain, they started their urban gardening to supplement their nutritional sources. This effort ties in with UNSDG 2 - Zero Hunger.

As cited earlier, the Roman imperial context included an unhealthy, socially conflictual environment that made people suffer. Like the story of the Canaanite daughter, Jesus' healing interventions show him overcoming these expressions of social conflict. The Canaanite woman's persistence indicates the need to expand his healing ministry to the Gentiles, particularly Gentile women. Since the Alliance prioritised UNSDG 3 on Good Health and Wellbeing during the pandemic, they extended financial support to the members who were/are infected by COVID-19. Likewise, twenty health workers among them received training from INAM, a health NGO specialising in acupuncture. Closely related with this goal is UNSDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation which is one of their main problems. They were able to coordinate with the National Housing Authority to fix their supply of clean water and they received some financial assistance from the city government and Manila Waters to address the sewerage repair. This improved situation made life slightly more tolerable for them, especially as everybody had to stay at home during the lockdown.

The Canaanite woman provides a teaching moment for Jesus and the disciples, by subverting the dog metaphor to her advantage. The skills and insights gathered from the interpretative act contribute to quality education in biblical traditions with a gender perspective. This is important, as most of them are Christians and Catholics. Considering their prioritised UNSDG 4, quality education for the young is currently difficult to fully achieve, since teaching moments are jeopardised by the lack of online gadgets and the Alliance mothers' concern that they cannot fully explain the lessons to their school-age children. While help was given by the Pasig City's allocation of some tablets for the young constituents and the Department of Education consultation with parents on modular learning, difficulties remain. It helped to some extent, but it is still not an ideal situation. This goal also continues

to be challenging, due to the prohibitive cost of internet subscriptions and the frequent erratic nature of the signal.

Finally, the Canaanite woman's wit and persistence challenged the discrimination concerning healing based on ethnicity, religion, and gender at that time. The marginalisation was overturned after she defeated Jesus in the challenge riposte. Consequently, the story demonstrates the expansion of the Matthean Jesus' understanding of his self-identity, role, and initial response towards a more inclusive identity as Son of David and as healer. This aspect also highlights the need for critically assessing the portrayal of biblical characters when they exhibit discriminating traits, even if the character was the Matthean Jesus. Considering the Alliance during this pandemic, their communal identity was tested because they come from various urban poor villages, and some members resisted the quarantine health protocols. The achievement of the UNSDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions is noted in their communal agreement on COVID-19 protocols implemented by the Alliance's Estate Management. Of late, the community and the UPWARD-UP researchers note their need for more consciousness on the efforts and impact of women's leadership and gender perspective on the issues they confront and the solutions they find by raising their voices and forging connections to achieve their collective dreams. Our local community organiser informed us that they are also conducting initial discussions on revisiting their own vision-mission and to articulate them using the language of the USNDGs.

6. CELEBRATE AND/OR RITUALISE: SYMBOLIC INTEGRATION WITH THE CANAANITE WOMAN AND THE ALLIANCE

The first level of the spiral in the theologising process ends with either a celebration, when the result of the "act" is successful, or a ritualisation, when the outcome needs improvements or when the results are not yet favourable or are delayed. Afterwards, a new set of the same process allows the spiral to continue. Considering the experience of the Alliance, they already have many successful attempts in their choices to challenge the pre-pandemic difficulties that were exacerbated by the pandemic era. The community is generous in prayers of thanksgiving during the community meetings and the co-learning sessions. Moreover, they also ritualise through prayers when the desired results are still incomplete or unsuccessful. We plan to continue encouraging them to use poetry, songs, and artistic expressions, with or without a biblical theme, as part of this personal and communal integrative step. For now, this is our tribute to them:

#ChooseToChallenge

The Canaanite woman pleaded.

But also confronted the “NO” of the disciples and of Jesus.

She acknowledged Jesus’ mission to the house of Israel.

Yet challenged him to expand his identity and ministry
beyond ethnicity, religion, and gender.

#ChooseToChallenge

The Alliance women plead.

They confront the many “NOs” brought about by the pandemic.

They acknowledge their power to demand sustainable development.

They challenge the powers-that-be to transformation, inclusivity,
and sustainability.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrated how the UPWARD-UP research team works with the Alliance community to articulate and attain their prioritised UNSDGs, namely 1 - No Poverty; 3 - Health and Well-being (in relation with the Environment); 4 - Quality Education, and 16 - Justice, Peace and Strong Institutions through the lens of Goal 5 - Gender equality as they experience the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the pastoral process of see-judge-act-evaluate-celebrate/ritualise, we theologised on the urban poor women’s experiences accompanied by a feminist biblical characterisation of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. Like the Canaanite woman who chose to challenge the obstacles of ethnicity, religion, and gender put forward by Jesus and his male disciples, the Alliance community shows how they are also countering the challenges they face in their context in line with their efforts to achieve their own prioritised UNSDGs.

In working on this study, we also realised that this process advances feminist biblical scholarship when it is in dialogue with a concrete community of urban poor women who embody and are inspired by the Canaanite woman’s story. Even under the COVID-19 restrictions, it is a challenging process to engage the women from the Alliance digitally through the smartphone and internet connectivity with the support of the project. The research partnership also promotes and documents the knowledge generation and dissemination through academic-community partnership. Consequently, this multisectoral research partnership and the new knowledge generated and disseminated in many ways on the local and global levels such as this publication, contribute to the promotion of contextual biblical hermeneutics which is grounded in the reality of the Alliance both as object and as subject of the study. This study also advances the need to add the steps of evaluate-celebrate/ritualise to

the well-known see-judge-act method, given the lacunae for assessing the impact of the action and the importance of activities that help in the personal and communal integration and transformation when the results of the actions are positive (celebrate) or negative (ritualise). Finally, we are also glad that this investigation adds to the promotion of sustainability studies with the recognition of the unique yet oft-relegated contribution of theology and biblical studies and voices of communities such as the Alliance. This research inquiry enhances the interpretation of the biblical story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus' response (Mt. 15:21-28) from a sustainability perspective. In view of the foregoing, the Alliance community and the UPWARD-UP project want to nurture this possibility of promoting a life-giving community-building process during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV). 1989.

The New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms, and with Roman Catholic Deutero-Canon (NAB). 1991.

AJAYI, C.

2019. Role of religion on climate change governance: The influence of RNGO in COP 21. Dept. of Global Political Studies, Malmo University, Sweden.

BROWN, R.E.

2016. *An introduction to the New Testament*. Edited by M.L. Soards. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvvggx32v>

CADWALLADER, A.H.

2005. When a woman is a dog: Ancient and modern ethology meet the Syrophenician woman. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1(4):35.1-35.17. <https://doi.org/10.2104/bc050035>

CARTER, W.

2001. *Matthew and empire: Initial explorations*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

CHAN, S.

2021. HR guide: How to celebrate International Women's Day on a budget. *Human Resources Online.Net*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/41qGNve> [15 February 2023].

CHOI, B.C.K. & PAK, A.W.P.

2006. Multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in health research, services, education, and policy: 1. Definitions, objectives, and evidence of effectiveness. *Clinical and Investigative Medicine* 29(6):351-364.

CHOROVER, T. & ARRIENS, J.

2020. *Faced with forced relocation, the people of one Philippine city designed their own climate-resilient neighborhood*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.wri.org/insights/faced-forced-relocation-people-one-philippine-city-designed-their-own-climate-resilient> [15 February 2023].

CICHOS, K., SOBKOWIAK, J.A., SADOWSKI, R.F., ZBARACHEWICZ, B., ZENDEROWSKI, R. & DZIEKOŃSKI, S. (Eds)

2021. *Sustainable Development Goals and the Catholic Church: Catholic social teaching and the UN's Agenda 2030*. Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003053620>

CORLEY, J.

2000. Methods of biblical interpretation: A guide. *Scripture Bulletin* 30(2):2-15.

DOWNING, R.

2016. Christian involvement in Sustainable Development Goals. *Christian Journal for Global Health* 3(1):73-76. <https://doi.org/10.15566/cjgh.v3i1.105>

FANDER, M.

2012. Gospel of Mark: Women as true disciples of Jesus. In: L. Schottroff & M.-T. Wacker (eds). Translated by L.E. Dahill, E.R. Kalin, N. Lukens, L.M. Maloney, B. Rumscheidt, M. Rumscheidt & T. Steiner, *Feminist biblical interpretation: A compendium of critical commentary on the books of the Bible and related literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 626-644.

GLANCY, J.A.

2010. Jesus, the Syrophoenician woman, and other first-century bodies. *Biblical Interpretation*, 18(4/5):342-363. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851510X517582>.

GULLOTTA, D.N.

2014. Among dogs and disciples: An examination of the story of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and the question of the gentile mission within the Matthean community. *Neotestamentica* 48(2):325-340.

GUTERRES, A.

2020. *Put women and girls at the centre of efforts to recover from COVID-19*. United Nations. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19> [10 April 2020].

HINTJENS, H.M.

1997. What has God to do with sustainable development? A Sahelian dialogue. *Worldviews* 1(3):211-230. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853597X00137>

IBITA, M.M.

2021. Meals and mission: A contextual reading of the Lukan meal scenes in the Filipino context. In: F. Del Castillo (ed.), *A flourishing faith: Celebrating 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines* (Paranaque, Philippines: Don Bosco School of Theology), pp. 47-70.

IBITA, M.M.S.

2021. The world and God's world: Of COVID-19, VUCA world, and visions for the future. *Maryhill School of Theology Review* 23(1):135-165.

JONES, L., PALUMBO, D. & BROWN, D.

2021. Coronavirus: How the pandemic has changed the world economy. *BBC News*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225> [24 January 2021].

LANDWEHR, C. & SCHÄFER, A.

2020. *Populist, technocratic, and authoritarian responses to COVID-19. Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy-and-pandemics/populist-technocratic-and-authoritarian-responses-to-covid-19/> [23 July 2020].

LEININGER, J. & STRIEBINGER, K.

2016. How to cooperate with religious actors on sustainable development – Three tips. *German Development Institute*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.diegdi.de/en/the-current-column/article/how-to-cooperate-with-religious-actors-on-sustainable-development-three-tips-1/> [15 February 2023].

LYONS-PARDUE, K.J.

2019. A Syrophoenician becomes a Canaanite: Jesus exegetes the Canaanite woman in Matthew. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13(2):235-250. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jtheointe.13.2.0235>

MAWIS, V.L.

2018. *When God wills the people's plan*. Inquirer.Net. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://business.inquirer.net/255474/god-wills-peoples-plan> [11 August 2018].

McKENNA, M.

1994. *Not counting women and children: Neglected stories from the Bible*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

NILSEN, T.D.

2020. Green goals: The SDGs in ecological hermeneutics. *Biblical Interpretation* 1:1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00284P19>

PILCH, J.J.

2020. Honor and shame. Historical cultural context: Saint Louis University Sunday Web Site. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3Z3U3o3> [16 August 2020].

RHOADS, D.

1982. Narrative criticism and the Gospel of Mark. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50(3):411-434. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/L.3.411>

RUBANO, C.

2016. Where do the mermaids stand? Toward a “gender-creative” pastoral sensibility. *Pastoral Psychology* 65(6):821-834. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-015-0680-2>

SANDS, J.

2018. Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act as an interdisciplinary method to move theory into practice. *Religions* 9(4):129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040129>

SWART, I. & NELL, E.

2016. Religion and development: The rise of a bibliography. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4):1-27. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3862>.

THE CENTER FOR SYSTEMS SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING (CSSE).

2023. COVID-19 Dashboard – Global Map, Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> [15 February 2023]

UNITED NATIONS

2020. *Policy brief on COVID impact on women*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/41iDrdX> [9 April 2020].

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

2020. *COVID-19: Human development on course to decline this year for the first time since 1990*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/covid-19-human-development-course-decline-year-first-time-1990> [20 May 2020].

WAINWRIGHT, E.M.

2010. *Towards a feminist critical reading of the Gospel according to Matthew*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

WITTENBERG-COX, A.

2020. What do countries with the best Coronavirus responses have in common? Women leaders. *Forbes*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3lwwQno> [13 April 2020].

ZENGER, J. & FOLKMAN, J.

2020. Research: Women are better leaders during a crisis. *Harvard Business Review*. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2020/12/research-women-are-better-leaders-during-a-crisis> [30 December 2020].

Keywords

Matthew 15:21-28

Canaanite woman

UNSDG

UPWARD-UP

Trefwoorde

Matteus 15:21-28

Kanaänitiese vrou

UNSDG

UPWARD-UP