

**Notes and Comments**

**THE SECOND PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE PHILIPPINES  
(20 JANUARY - 17 FEBRUARY 1991):  
A BRIEF ACCOUNT**

Pedro S. de Achútegui, S.J.

What may easily turn out to be the greatest 20th century ecclesial event in the Philippines unfolded from January 20 to February 17, 1991: the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II for short). It did not attract the multitudes whom the apostolic pilgrimages of Pope Paul VI in 1970 and John Paul II in 1981 had energized. But still it may be safe to say that the three years of intense preparation that preceded the Council have affected more Filipino Catholics in a deeper way than the enthusiasm aroused by the visits of the two Popes.

Moreover, judging from the unabated and ever increasing interest evident during the first four months following the conclusion of the Council, the expected results may be even more significant than initially anticipated. With all due humility and admitting the disparity of any such comparisons, the Council and its results may be related more closely to a "little Pentecost" than to a sudden theophany at Mount Tabor. Surely, for those who have been involved in the preparation and actual work of the Council, and for those who have experienced even the initial gusts of its effects, the power of the Spirit has blown with creative dynamism. After all, one could surmise, since this was the first plenary council celebrated in the whole Church after the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law in 1983, the Holy Spirit could not be absent from such a unique gathering. No small part of the Council's success may be attributed to the Lord's benevolent answer to prayers rising from all the isles of the Philippine archipelago, especially from the contemplative monasteries, and to the sufferings of countless members of the People of God who offered their crosses for the spiritual success of the Council.

The present Note intends to offer a summary presentation of the highlights of the Council. The next issue of this periodical will carry a full-length article on the Council — assuming, as it is legitimate to assume, that by then the Congregation for Bishops in Rome might have already given its favorable approval of the Council document.

Although a Plenary Council had been in the mind of the Philippine bishops for some time, the idea finally materialized in Rome in October 1987, and was broached to the bishops in the January 1988 assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) held in Tagaytay. It was approved *viva voce* by all the participants, again unanimously approved in secret balloting by all the bishops present in the July 1988 assembly, and confirmed by the Congregation for Bishops on November 16, 1988.

The *reasons* that moved the CBCP to take this momentous decision were many. First, there were the many changes that have taken place in the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council, together with the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law. Second, the changes in the Church in the Philippines, and in Philippine society in general since the First Plenary Council in 1953, produced a new problematic with new pastoral issues. This is confirmed by simple statistics. From 1953 to the end of the eighties the population had increased from 27 to 60 million (122%); the number of Catholics from 23.5 to 50 million (112.7%); the number of bishops from 21 to 119 (466%); dioceses from 27 to 77 (185%); parishes from 1,301 to 2,192 (68.5%); religious orders of men from 25 to 60 (167%), and of women from 28 to over 200 (642%); diocesan priests from 1,260 to 3,407 (168.7%); religious priests from 1,204 to 2,165 (79.8%); brothers from 183 to 483 (164%); and religious sisters from 2,908 to 9,231 (217.4%). Since this extraordinary increase in the Church in the Philippines involved a totally new situation and a totally new problematic, it was high time to tackle the implications of these statistics. The socio-political situation had also changed radically from 1953, and particularly so since the 1986 bloodless revolution. The need of a council seemed logical and imperative. The bishops acted accordingly and decided to hold a council.

A *Coordinating Committee* for the work of preparation was established. Its function was to prepare materials, coordinate activities, establish mechanisms, organize conferences and seminars, mobilize institutions, initiate research, and come up with concrete suggestions and proposals.

*Surveys* were conducted through written questionnaires and personal interviews at all levels: national, regional, diocesan, parochial; and among all sectors: bishops and priests, lay and religious, in universities, seminaries, schools, lay organizations, parish-related associations, and independent Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), social action centers and associations of workers.

From the collated responses it was possible to obtain a sufficiently clear view of the situation. The emerging picture allowed the categorization of all the ideas and suggestions proposed. The concerns gravitated around seven pivotal themes: (1) The Council should be geared towards the revitalization of *Christian Life* both of individual Catholics and of the Church in the Philippines, including its institutions. *Christian Life* however would be taken up in all its dimensions, vertical and horizontal, with all its constitutive and integrative elements. (2) Hence the second area of concentration was *Religious Concerns*, (3) and the third, *Social Concerns*. (4) Since the people who are members of the Church are also members of the civil society, there exists the problematic involved in their mutual relationships and interaction. Thus the fourth area of concern was constituted by the theme *Church and Society*.

The renewal of both Church and Society, involving the transformation of persons and institutions, was the goal of the Council. But who would be the agents to work for this intended revitalization and transformation? The agents were identified as (5) the *Lay Faithful*, (6) the *Religious*, and (7) the members of the *Clergy*, with all the needed presuppositions, problematic and implications.

Seven *commissions* were thus established to work in the preparation of the corresponding position papers. The papers were to be studied and discussed at all levels. Each commission was composed of three bishops, one of whom acting as chairman, and several experts. The position papers went through four different drafts following the suggestions proposed by different groups at the national, regional, diocesan and parochial levels, and compris-

ing people in pastoral work at the grass roots, people in academic institutions, and those in professional and vocational groups and associations. The fifth and final drafts, incorporating suggestions and proposals that came on time, were submitted to the members of the Council for discussion, deliberation, and decision.

The *composition of the Council* had to follow the Canon Law prescriptions regulating the holding of plenary councils. For various reasons, not all who were entitled to be members of the Council were able to participate. The actual number of participants was: 95 bishops with deliberative vote (73 of them residential); 181 priests in various categories; 21 major religious superiors, men and women, of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life; 12 presidents or rectors of Catholic universities; 24 rectors or deans of seminaries; and 146 lay faithful chosen by the dioceses in accordance with criteria previously established.

The solemn *liturgical opening* took place at the Manila cathedral and minor basilica of the Immaculate Conception. All the following sessions, both general and regional, were held at the San Carlos Seminary complex in Makati, Metro Manila. The big chapel of the Holy Apostles Senior Seminary was transformed into the conciliar hall.

The *discussions* began with a presentation of the seven position papers followed by clarifications, discussion by regions and topics, and daily reporting to the general assembly. The participants showed their preference, and voted accordingly, for the preparation of only one conciliar document that would incorporate, unify and simplify the situationers of the various position papers, and integrate into it the ideas and proposals coming from both the position papers and the conciliar discussions. The document, as the deliberations themselves, had to take into account the four dimensions that had been considered essential for achieving the total revitalization of the Church in the Philippines: the focus must be Christ, the orientation must be pastoral, the spirit should be evangelization, and the context Filipino.

With this in mind, the Council approved by unanimous consensus a well integrated document that was submitted to Rome for approval (the Latin term in the Code is "recognitio"), which comes down to us from Pope Sixtus V in the 16th century.

The document is divided into five well defined parts:

*Part I* describes "Our World — The Philippines: Lights and Shadows." It is the unified situationer, representing both the Church in the Philippines and Philippine society, presenting an overview of the entire context which forms the background for the hoped-for revitalization.

"Envisioning a Church Renewed" is the title of *Part II*. It examines the "way of Jesus" and "His call today," our response in faith, and a vision of the Church as a Community of the Disciples of Jesus, a Community-in-Mission, with emphasis on the Church of the Poor and basic ecclesial communities.

*Part III* reflects on "A Renewed Integral Evangelization" with two sections: *section one*, "announcing a message of salvation" that develops the renewal of catechesis and worship, and the characteristics of the new evangelization; and *section two*, "announcing a message of liberation" that deals with social ministry and the spirituality of social transformation. The problems of politics and ideology are treated here at length.

"The Community of Disciples: Workers for Renewal" is the subject matter of *Part IV*. It examines the vocation and role of the lay faithful, the religious, the clergy and other communities of renewal as agents of evangelization.

"Agenda Towards Renewal: Resolutions Approved by the Council," offered in *Part V*, may be the most significant and concrete result of the Council. The resolutions present the Council's decisions for renewal and its proposals for action. They will be later on known as the "decrees" of the Council. Part V contains 132 articles under 14 titles with sections and subsections.

From the point of view of *sociology*, the document presents a forceful description of the Philippine reality, of both Church and Society. From the *theological* point of view it offers a clear vision of what the Church in the Philippines is expected to be in order to become truly herself and fulfill her mission: a community of disciples of Jesus where communion and participation are the key elements. The following of Jesus is the absolute condition for the renewal of Christian and Church life. Only thus can she be a Community-in-Mission. The *pastoral* aspect stresses social ministry for social transformation with a decided preferential option for the poor, thus making her the Church of the poor, and basic ecclesial communities. From the point of view of *action*, the document

emphasizes the need of total involvement of the lay faithful in the life and mission of the Church and in civil society, a greater insertion of the religious into the local Church, and the need of total immersion of the clergy in the life of the community, particularly through their own witness and ministry, with strong emphasis on spirituality.

All this will likely lead to the drawing up of a *national pastoral plan* which has long been a desideratum of the Church in the Philippines, in order to facilitate the proper coordination of all apostolic activities with a view to a renewed evangelization.

It is still much too early to make a thorough evaluation of the Council. The results will be known only years after the closing — the pangs of the Second Vatican Council are still being felt. It may be said, however, without fear of error, that the Council was a high moment in the life of the Church in the Philippines. It was a necessary step to cope with the changing times which the Council faced squarely. The Church in the Philippines at large was made aware of the forthcoming event, there was "communion and participation" at work, there were healthy tensions during the Council, and there were moments of despondency.

But then, and above all, there was a kind of sudden irruption of the Spirit that softened the tensions and shaped conflicting ideas into an organic and harmonious whole. While there had been clouds during the first three weeks, these passed to reveal a blue sky which instilled peace and serenity all during the last week. It started on February 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, whose statue of the Immaculate Conception presided over the sessions of the Council. From that day on, there was smooth sailing, warming hearts, and the hand of God visibly blessing the work of the first plenary council to be held in the Church under the new Code of Canon Law. It was God smiling: "and God saw all that he had made and it was very good" (Gn 1:31).

The Council presented a vision of the Philippine Church to come. At the same time, and as a result of the Council, it offered a vision of a people and a nation renewed. Let me conclude with a sketch of the kind of Filipino nation that the Council envisioned:

This is our vision. That all may have life (*mabigyan ng buhay*).

We shall have to create a free nation:  
where human dignity and solidarity  
are respected and promoted;  
where moral principles prevail in socio-economic  
life and structures;  
where justice, love and solidarity are the inner  
driving forces of development.

We shall have to build a sovereign nation:  
where every tribe and faith are respected;  
where diverse tongues and traditions work  
together for the good of all;  
where membership is a call  
to participation and involvement  
and leadership a summons to generous service.

Ours will have to be a people:  
in harmony with one another  
through unity in diversity;  
in harmony with creation,  
and in harmony with God.

Ours shall be a civilization of life and love.

The hard work starts *now*. A council is as good as its implementation will prove to be. This depends on all members of the Philippine Church — with the grace of God who will never fail us.

The Council closed on February 17 with a solemn liturgy in the Manila cathedral. Symbolically, as in a little Pentecost, the Council's Message was read in different Philippine languages. Each Filipino heard in his own tongue the marvels God had accomplished through the Council (cf. Acts 2:11). With God's blessing, the Council may be expected to have dynamically ushered the Church in the Philippines into the 21st century.