

TEACHING CHRISTOLOGY ACCORDING TO THE SECOND PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE PHILIPPINES

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A thoughtful perusal of the *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*¹ will show there are two basic and central topics that were the foundation and presupposition of the reflections and discussions of the Council: Christology and Ecclesiology. The present article will highlight the more important points of the Christology of PCP II, arrange those points in such a way that will facilitate their discussion in a one-semester Christology course, and in a general way show how this Christology can be taught to the Christian faithful of the Philippines. Hopefully such an article will help towards a better and deeper appreciation of PCP II and a more effective implementation of its decrees.

A convenient way of fleshing out this article is simply to follow the flow of discussion as given in the *Acts* of PCP II. The course can start with a Situationer or Introduction, followed by three sections focusing on the Person of Jesus Christ, both the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith, then discussing the Message and Mission of Jesus especially as seen in his teaching regarding the Kingdom of God, ending with a more contemporary and pastoral reflection on the Paschal Mystery especially as this provides the basis of the Christian's involvement with the mission of the Church today.

1. All references will be to the *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* 20 January — 17 February 1991 (Manila: Secretariat, Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992). Hereafter referred to simply as *Acts*.

I. INTRODUCTION (or Situationer)

To introduce a course on Christology following the orientation of PCP II, we must turn to ourselves as Church and ask ourselves "where we are today in the face of present realities . . . what our corporate faith has to say — and do — to the Philippines and the world now" (no. 28).

More specifically, since we are a people who believe in Jesus the Christ as Lord and Savior we must ask if he makes a difference in our lives (no. 2). PCP II has noted that we Filipinos cling to the faith in large numbers, and up to this day we have kept the traditions of our forefathers in the faith. We have maintained, for example, our beautiful devotions to the Santo Niño of Christmas (the carolling, the "Simbang Gabi," the "Panunuluyan" and the Midnight Mass) and the Santo Padre Jesus Nazareno of Holy Week (the reading of the "Pasyon," the innumerable "Via Crucis," the "Senakulo," the Seven Last Words, the "Santo Entierro," the "Salubong," etc.). But asks PCP II, have we grown in our faith, have we seen the full flowering of our life of faith in Christ? (nos. 5, 2). Unfortunately, for most Filipinos today the faith is still very much focused on these devotions and centered on the practice of the rites of popular piety, and "not on the Word of God, not on community, and not on building up our world unto the image of the Kingdom" (no. 13).

II. THE FILIPINO CHRIST

Still, the Filipino's attachment to Jesus is deep and his devotional life in relation to Christ is rich. The Introduction can now logically move to a discussion of the Filipino Christ. There are already a number of published books and articles that the professor can use for a fruitful discussion of the "Filipino Christ."²

2. The following can be useful for discussions on the "Filipino Christ": Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987); Douglas J. Elwood and Patricia L. Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987) 1-11; Ruben J. Villote, "Who is Christ to the Filipino?" *My Xth Hour* (Antipolo, Rizal: SynerAide Consultancies, 1987) 85-91; and the author's "Christ at EDSA: The Filipino Faces of Christ and Christian Spirituality," *Landas* 2 (July 1988) 149-64.

Reflection on the Filipino Christ can help show the student where the Filipino believer is now as far as his belief in Christ is concerned.

This part of the course could focus on the images of Christ that are popular with Filipinos and show their value and significance for the faith of the believer. Among these images are: that of the Child Jesus (Santo Niño), the suffering Jesus (Padre Jesus Nazareno) together with the dead Jesus (Santo Entierro). Other popular images are the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Christ the King, Jesus the Miracle Worker, Jesus as Friend and Brother, and Jesus the Liberator and Servant. It will be important to point out to the student how these images correspond to values and needs found in the Filipino soul, but that a one-sided emphasis on any one image can distort our understanding of Jesus.

From the Situationer, PCP II moves on to reflect on Jesus. And who is this Jesus? PCP II tells us to go back to the Jesus who walked our earth, and also to the Christ who now lives with the Father. To be faithful to the spirit and orientation of PCP II, our Christology must go back to the historical Jesus, to the Christ proclaimed in Scripture, and to the Christ we meet in the living tradition of the Church. We must present the Total Christ.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

PCP II says that because we are followers and disciples of Christ, we must love with his love and live with his life. The whole process must lead us back "to the person of Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; Jesus who preached and worked miracles, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and, from the dead, rose again. Jesus who now lives at the right hand of the Father — but continues to be in our midst." "We have to retell his story to ourselves, that we may more credibly, more authoritatively, tell it to others" (nos. 35-36).

However, the professor will have to point out to the student how the research on, and discussion of, the historical Jesus has today become quite complicated and not easy to handle in a one-semester course. For example, two recent books present

major attempts to re-examine the "historical Jesus."³ The two books illustrate very well the state of contemporary scholarship regarding the historical Jesus and highlight the critical differences over methods and sources that produce radically different portraits of Jesus.

Contemporary discussions of the Historical Jesus serve to show the complexity of the problems connected with the topic. Indications of this complexity may be gathered from the following selected sentences from John Meier:

The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus . . . What do we mean when we say we want to investigate the "real" Jesus or the "real" Nero or the real anybody in ancient history? The notion of "real" is a tricky one that needs careful distinction . . . In historical research there are different gradations in the sense of "real." Obviously we cannot mean the *total* reality of that person, everything he or she ever thought, felt, experienced, did or said, the "reasonably complete" record of the "real" Jesus is irrevocably lost to us today.⁴

How about the terms "historical Jesus" or "Jesus of history"? Again, Meier points out that the Jesus of history is a modern abstraction and construct, the Jesus scholars say they are able to "recover" and examine by using scientific tools of modern historical research. Another term that is sometimes used which can cause confusion is the phrase "the earthly Jesus" or "Jesus during his life on earth." The terms are ambiguous because they can also be used for the real Jesus or the historical Jesus: they all refer to Jesus on earth.⁵ The reader might be helped to reflect on Willi Marxsen's definition of the historical Jesus as "Jesus before anyone has ventured any interpretation of him."⁶ Marxsen further says: "there is no answer to the quest for the historical Jesus. By this I mean that all attempts to reach the

3. The two books are John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

4. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 21-22.

5. Ibid. 25.

6. Willi Marxsen, *Jesus and Easter* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990) 16.

historical Jesus have failed and — as I hope to be able to demonstrate — they have failed for good."⁷

Finally, how about the terms "historical" (*historisch*) and "historic" (*geschichtlich*) which for a long time have been popular especially among German scholars? Meier doubts the usefulness of the distinction for English-speaking scholars today for four reasons. He writes: (1) After close to a century of use, the distinction remains ambiguous and varies in meaning or function from author to author, with even some Germans not observing it. (2) The distinction, while supposedly employed to facilitate objective research, often carries with it the extra baggage of theological or ideological agendas. (3) The twofold distinction does not do justice to the complexity of the situation. (4) While defensible in theory, it is useless in the real world — even the "real" world of scholars.⁸

THE CHRISTOLOGY FROM BELOW

For the requirements of a one-semester course and to answer the call of PCP II to go back "to the person of Christ, Jesus of Nazareth" (no. 35), it will be sufficient to introduce the students to the "Christology from below" as the term has been popularly used especially after Vatican II and as the term is differentiated from the "Christology from above."⁹ While not using the term, PCP II gives particular importance to the Christ from below. He is "Jesus of Nazareth, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." He is Jesus who preached and worked miracles, who lived among us as our fellow human being, like us in all things, sin alone excepted. He underwent the process of human growth. He "grew and became strong" and "advanced in wisdom and age, and favor before

7. Ibid. 13.

8. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 26-27.

9. Quite a number of books and articles are available for developing a "Christology from Below." The following are recommended: Daniel A. Helminiak, *The Same Jesus. A Contemporary Christology* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1986) 155-272; Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: Orbis, 1978) 326-42; Gerald O'Collins, "Jesus in Current Theology," *The Way* 16 (1976) 291-308; James Kroeger, *Knowing Jesus Christ* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989) 3-23.

God and man." He lived the life of a carpenter, shared the life of the human community and worked in a hidden way for the greater part of his life. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he died and rose again from the dead (nos. 35, 37).

Very important both in the Christologies from below and that of PCP II is the emphasis on the man Jesus and his human history. The earthly life of Jesus is shown as his path to ultimate fulfillment and contemplating his humanity becomes the means to come to understand and believe in his divinity.

THE RISEN JESUS

But the Christology of PCP II does not stop with the historical Jesus. For it continues with the profession that Jesus now lives at the "right hand of the Father" and "continues to live in our midst." PCP II professes that Jesus is the "Son of God, sent by the Father out of love for us, so that we might have life through him." "The Father identified him as His Son and His suffering servant" (no. 31).

Discussion of the Risen Christ is especially important for Filipinos. It has been pointed out by some religious sociologists that the Christ for many Filipinos, especially the men, is the scourged, defeated and humiliated Christ (in the image of the Padre Jesus Nazareno carrying the cross) or even the dead Christ (in the image of the Santo Entierro).¹⁰ It is very likely that this strong laudable devotion of many Filipinos to the suffering Jesus might have obscured for them the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and its importance for the everyday life of the faithful. PCP II notes that "we have kept the traditions of our forbears in the faith" and that "for most of our people today the faith is centered on the practice of the rites of popular piety" (nos. 11, 13). Especially noteworthy are the popular devotions followed by the people in connection with the celebration of Lent and Holy Week. Among these are the following: the reading of the *Pasyon* that goes on for whole nights once Lent begins; the Stations of the Cross (which sometimes are turned into "penitential

10. See Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 6-7; also Sevilla, "Christ at EDSA," 158.

pilgrimages" and so cover long distances under the heat of the blazing March or April sun), the *flagelantes* (which unfortunately have been made tourist attractions by some unscrupulous persons), the dramatizations of the life of Christ by various *Senakulo* groups, the countless numbers of the faithful joining retreats and recollections especially during Holy Week, and other practices.

Unfortunately, these many devotions of Lent and Holy Week have not yet given the great majority of our people a deeper awareness of the value of the Resurrection for the Christian faith. For many Filipinos, the celebrations of Easter are practically anticlimactic. It would seem that all their energies and emotions have been spent for Lent and Holy Week, nothing more is left for Easter!¹¹ But as PCP II says, we have to reflect on the Risen Christ if, as we shall discuss further down, we want our Church to engage in renewed evangelization. And so the Jesus in the Christology of PCP II is "not merely a historical figure, etched only in the memory of his followers. Jesus lives! He who was crucified is risen from the dead" (no. 62). He is the Christ whom every Christian today must personally accept as Lord and Savior (cf. also no. 64).

SALVATION AS TOTAL LIBERATION

At this point, the treatment of salvation can be introduced. But salvation according to PCP II must be integral or total liberation as this is explained by Pope Paul VI in his great Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (nos. 9, 29) and adopted by the Philippine bishops. Our bishops wrote:

This is EVANGELIZATION: the proclamation, above all, of SALVATION from sin; the LIBERATION from everything oppressive to man; the DEVELOPMENT of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and, ultimately, the RENEWAL OF SOCIETY in all its strata through the interplay of the GOSPEL TRUTHS and man's concrete TOTAL LIFE (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nos. 9, 29). THIS IS OUR TASK, THIS IS OUR MISSION (no. 166).

11. See P. Sevilla, *People's Faith is People's Power. A Filipino Christological Catechism* (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 1986) 42.

SALVATION AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

But the understanding of salvation as total and integral liberation cannot be separated from the person of Jesus and his message about the Kingdom. For the central aspect of the teaching of Jesus concerns the Kingdom of God, and everything in the message and ministry of Jesus serve a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it — the demands of discipleship and justice, the meaning of salvation and liberation, and relationship to God and community: all are to be understood in the context of the Kingdom proclamation. A Christology according to the thrust of PCP II cannot be complete without a treatment of the Kingdom.¹²

Moreover, the more deeply we are able to understand the message of the Kingdom, the better and more completely we are able to understand the person of Jesus. As PCP II points out, and as it has been regularly mentioned by exegetes and theologians, in the person of Jesus, by his word and work, the Kingdom of God has already broken into our world. "When Jesus proclaims his Father's word, the Kingdom comes. When he expels demons, the Kingdom of God comes. His table-fellowship with sinners anticipates the eternal banquet of the Kingdom" (no. 40).

THE "ABBA" EXPERIENCE OF JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD¹³

There is an intimate connection between the relation of Jesus to the Father, especially as seen in his "Abba experience," and the meaning of the Kingdom of God. Joachim Jeremias has

12. Numerous books and articles are available on the topic of "Kingdom of God." The following are especially recommended: Benedict Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988); P. Hünermann, "Reign of God," *Sacramentum Mundi* (1970) 5:233-340; Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976) 72-112; John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1989); Jürgen Moltmann, "First the Kingdom of God," *Tripod* 11 (May/June 1991) 6-27.

13. The following references can be helpful here: Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967) 54-65; Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 80-83; see also the author's article in footnote 2 esp. 153-58.

pointed out that it was from Jesus' prayer, rooted in his experience of God as Abba that he received the Kingdom message. The intimacy, familiarity, and authority expressed in the direct invocation of his God as Abba was in Jesus' own life the personal basis of his preaching about the Kingdom of God. The use of Abba by Jesus reveals the heart and deepest core of his relationship with God. Jesus experienced God as the one who comes as unconditional love. But this God also reveals himself as the God of History who, in Jesus, is bringing about the realization of the Kingdom in all those who will accept him.

But Jeremias has very well pointed out that in the prayers of Jesus, the Abba is not only an expression of obedient trust (Mk 14:36), but is at the same time a word of authority. It represents Jesus' own most characteristic mode of speech and it is the profoundest expression of his authority and the consciousness of his mission.¹⁴

To live the faith and to bear witness to Jesus as envisioned by PCP II (nos. 74-80), Filipinos who are already very devoted to the Santo Niño (no. 11) will be helped to remember that Jesus had authorized his disciples to say "Abba" after him. With this, Jesus gives them a share in his sonship and a share of his relationship with God that opens to them the doors to God's Kingdom. As Jeremias has noted, only the person who, through Jesus, shows himself to receive and nourish the childlike trust which resides in the word "Abba" will find his way into the Kingdom of God.¹⁵

What is said in the above lines has been very well summarized in the Acts of PCP II when it wrote: "What moved Jesus to announce the Kingdom and to gather a community of disciples was his intimate relationship with Abba, Father. Abba cared for people. Jesus did the same. The disciple can do no less. Abba was merciful and compassionate; so was Jesus" (no. 465). So must all the faithful be.

Depending on the wish of the professor and following the needs and interest of the students, much more can be developed on the topic of the Kingdom of God based on Part II, A. "The

14. Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 63.

15. *Ibid.* 97.

Way of Jesus," and B. "The Call of Jesus Today" (nos. 37-86).

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY: THE HIGH POINT OF PCP II CHRISTOLOGY

PCP II points to the Paschal Mystery, the dying and rising of Jesus, as "the decisive victory of the Kingdom of God in the world. He is lifted up from the earth and draws all to himself as Lord of those in heaven, on earth and under the earth. In Jesus, the power of God's reign irrupts, bursts into our history" (no. 41). It would seem then that the high point of a Christology according to the thrust and spirit of PCP II must be the Paschal Mystery.

But the discussion of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus must focus much more on the positive and pastoral significance of these mysteries. We can reflect on his death, not so much as "a taking away of his life, as a free offering of it for our redemption" (no. 55). By reflecting on the passion and death of Jesus, the Christian can be led to understand the breadth and length, height and depth of God's love for him (Eph 3:18-19), and by seeing the enormity of Christ's pain and suffering the Christian community can come to a deeper awareness of the evil and ugliness of sin and its effects. Some of these effects like poverty, disease, hunger, ignorance, sickness, corruption, and even death are what PCP says in so many places in its *Acts* which the Christian community must confront and endeavor to alleviate.

Finally, the Resurrection. Everything that PCP II says about the renewal of the Church — about responding to the call of Jesus and witnessing to the faith, about discipleship in community, about becoming a Church of the poor, about metanoia and social transformation in order to finally arrive at our new reality as a Church — all these are premised on a faithful following of a Jesus who died, rose again from the dead, and who now lives at the right hand of the Father, but continues to be in our midst (no. 35). Jesus taught his disciples "to live and die as he did. And his rising from the dead vindicated his kind of living and dying in the love of his Father, in the service of all" (no. 55).

The resurrection of Jesus must be acknowledged and proclaimed for what it really is — the cardinal affirmation and core of the Christian faith. It must be accepted as a salvific event that

has changed the world and our lives. It is the fundamental act of the Father revealing himself to man in love, and in Jesus changing the objective situation of mankind, making it possible for all to enter into the "new creation" by faith and baptism. For the first Christians did not regard the Resurrection simply as a marvelous event in the life of Jesus, but they attached to it very specific hopes for themselves, for mankind, and for the world. They expected nothing less than a new creation, where death will be no more, sin would be forgiven, and evil overcome. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now all is new" (2 Cor 5:17). The crucified Jesus lives, and it is in following him that we can arrive at the renewal of the Church envisioned by PCP II.

CONCLUSION

When the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines ended on the First Sunday of Lent, 17 February 1991, it proclaimed in its final message the ringing challenge of the Council not only to its participants — bishops, priests, religious and laity — but to all the faithful of the country to take part in the Council's thrust toward a New Evangelization. But it has to be a thrust towards a renewed evangelization that is "based not on human expectations and wisdom, but on the preaching of Christ Crucified to today's Filipinos and Asians" (p. xcvi). In these pages, we have tried to show the very rich Christology that ran through all the discussions and deliberations of PCP II, and is now permanently recorded in its *Acts and Decrees*. As the Final Message points out, the Council was intended "to be a venue for a meeting with Christ — sole architect of the Christian community" (p. xcvi). In this intention, PCP II has been very successful. We cannot really understand the spirit and thrust of this Council unless we carefully study the Christology running through all its *Acts and Decrees*, and arrive at a deep knowledge of the "Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:24-25).