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PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES: A COMMENTARY ON THE PCP II TEXT

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In exploring pastoral implications of basic ecclesial communities (BECs) in the Philippine Church today, I take as point of departure the section from PCP II's *Acts* entitled "Basic Ecclesial Communities: An Expression of Renewal." Belonging to Part II: A Church Renewed, the section speaks of the vision of the Church "today finding expression in *one* ecclesial movement."[1]

The BEC text itself is rather brief; the intimate link between BECs and the renewal of the Church, however, goes beyond it and is to be read elsewhere in the PCP II document. In his commentary focussed on Part I, Bishop Francisco Claver argues that BECs indicate the critical direction in the task of implementing PCP II. In the light of the present situation today, this task involves intensifying what is taking place within and without the church. Indeed, he suggests that the criterion for implementing that Council is "what is being done to create authentic and functioning BECs."[2]

The notion of "reception" as a theological concept was expounded on by Fr. Thomas Rausch in the *New Dictionary of Theology*. It evolved in the classical or historical sense in a context when the church was understood as a communion of

1. *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) 52-53 (nos. 137-140).

2. Francisco A. Claver, "Our World — The Philippines: Lights and Shadows," in Paul Bernier and Manuel G. Gabriel, eds., *Journeying with the Spirit: A Commentary on PCP II* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1993) 21.

churches. In this context, reception is the acceptance by local churches of particular ecclesiastical or conciliar decisions. It may also be noted that this understanding of the church as a "communion of churches" was paramount in the minds of those who initiated the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference, especially in view of building up basic ecclesial communities.

In the case of PCP II, it would seem that the Philippine Church hardly moved beyond the theology taught by Vatican II. But that move towards the implementation of the Ecumenical Council may rightly be considered as a reception by our local Church of the teachings of Vatican II, particularly where PCP II concretizes *Lumen Gentium* by linking it to the task of creating authentic BECs.

BEC TEXT IN PCP II

The description of "small communities of Christians" is made to revolve around "families who gather together around the Word of God and the Eucharist." Knowing each other by name, the members also share "their concerns both material and spiritual." Though united to their pastors, they are nevertheless "ministered to regularly by lay leaders." And as communities, they have "a strong sense of belongingness and of responsibility for one another."

Commonly found among the grassroots-poor, these communities are said to "consciously strive to integrate their faith and their daily life." Guided and encouraged by regular catechesis, the members are moved by their poverty and faith "towards solidarity with one another, action for justice, and towards a vibrant celebration of life in the liturgy."

The movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities is said to be "a pastoral priority" in many dioceses today. While other forms of small faith communities likewise exist, Basic Ecclesial Communities involve channeling "God-given charisms among the poor," with their "potential for evangelization" of the Philippine Church.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

In many areas of the Philippine Church, the task of Evangelization was launched in most of what is now known as lowland Christian Philippines. From the church's vantage-point, these areas comprise the plains running the entire length of Luzon from Nueva Segovia (Vigan, Ilocos Sur) to Nueva Caceres (Naga, Camarines Sur), being bounded by the Sierra Madre mountain ranges on the east, the Cordilleras on the west, and the northern indigenous communities from Baguio City up.

The pre-Hispanic population lived in small scattered settlements called "barangays."[3] Living along rivers or in inland forests, these village groupings of no more than 200 people were kinship groups linked either by blood or by marriage, with at times a sprinkling of slaves. It then became the task of the Spanish Crown to deal with this social phenomenon.

Colonial Spain's missionaries, soldiers, and administrators came to the islands imbued with an urban tradition which they sought to transplant to the new colony. It is said that they accomplished this in three ways: *reducción* which was the policy of encouraging the native population in any number of ways to forsake their dispersed villages in favor of larger aggregates, where the native population was much better served (and controlled); the plaza complex or the town which was organized along a grid-pattern moving out of the center built around a town hall and the church, which stood on different sides of a plaza; and the designation of Manila as the principal city which was to fulfill new functions as a center for the galleon trade, site for new urban wage-earners from rural subsistence cultivators, and the increasing ethnic mix of the city population with Spaniards, Chinese, and mestizos, as with the native population.[4]

Each town center was a symbolic concretization of the union of Church and State prevailing during the 16th century such that residents living therein were, in de la Costa's expression, *abajo*

3. Horacio de la Costa, *Readings in Philippine History* (Manila: Bookmark, 1965) 3.

4. Mary Racelis Hollnsteiner, "The Urbanization of Metropolitan Manila," IPC Papers No. 7. *Modernization: Its Impact in the Philippines, IV* (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1970) 149-52.

de las campanas, or within the sound of church bells. In this way, the native population came together for the first time in a new geographical location where the sense of unity was now founded on "religious" grounds.

The accomplishment of such evangelization is now evident in most areas of the country where, nominally, more than 80% of the population claim to be Roman Catholics. In a study of this Catholicism, religion is seen as largely "traditional and pietistic," with almost little organizational structure and minimal contact with religious functionaries.[5]

Some features of this religiosity include the following: an institutionalization of religion where (a) there is a poor sense of belonging among members because of sheer size, if not also an inadequate formation, (b) structures were evolved over time for quite different circumstances, and (c) church functionaries seemingly operate from a pre-Vatican II theology where faith and daily life are largely kept apart.

It is precisely in order to break that "circle" in the pattern of Philippine evangelization that BECs may be better understood. Bishop Claver argues in this fashion:

> The circle is being broken. And it is being broken in those dioceses and parishes where the very 'unchurched' have been challenged to form themselves into little communities of faith and they begin to respond positively. Where such communities are advanced as a Church priority, the likelihood of a more intense participation of the laity, as envisioned by Vatican II, is greater. And if there is vibrancy in their life, one clear reason is that, in the participatory ethic that characterizes them, they are more able to put together the practices of popular piety with the greater use of Scripture, real liturgical worship, the building up of a faith community and involvement in social issues.[6]

And yet, outside the areas of lowland Christian Philippines, one can still find "mission territories" even recently. Most of the island of Mindanao was in fact colonized only in the last period

5. John J. Carroll, "Magic and Religion," *Philippine Institutions* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1970) 44.

6. *Acts,* 10 (no. 17).

of Spanish rule, and effectively Christianized only in the 20th century especially with the coming of Christian migrants. Here, the features of religiosity listed above are less applicable than they are to heavily institutionalized parishes of lowland Philippines.

NEW FEATURES OF THE BECS

The characteristics of BECs are rather diverse, as are shown in a compilation of case studies of these communities.[7] Three features appear to be indicative of their commonality which are thus incorporated into their very designation as BEC.

COMMUNITIES

The search for "community" implies looking for what binds people together. In relatively simple communities, the activities and interaction of their members engender intense sentiments usually linked to some fairly defined geographical area, such as obtains in rural areas. The equivalent activities and interactions of people in more complex and wider geographical reach of urban settlements develop intense sentiments which are less tied to some clearly delineated space alone.

Away from town centers, organizing moves towards outlying areas. It may also take the form of creating new organizations which respond to new interests. There are efforts too to renew "mandated organizations," although these are not always successful.

Because of an authority-centered structure of church life, priests are especially important, even in launching BECs which would eventually empower lay participation and leadership in these communities. It may be, though, that only during the initiation-phase of BECs would clerical predominance be needed, until lay-initiative and -sharing are put in place.

7. Gabino A. Mendoza et al., eds., *Church of the People: The Basic Christian Community Experience in the Philippines* (Manila: Bishops-Businessmen's Conference, 1988) 1 ff.

BASIC

Precisely in those areas where institutionalization was not quite fixed, BECs evolved as efforts to instill a greater sense of belonging among members. In rural areas, the typical model is that of the small chapel, rather than the large parish church.[8] Another model associated with *Kristohanong Kasilinganan* (or, KRISKA) is composed of cells (with enough family members as to encourage face-to-face interaction. In urban areas, because of less geographical constraints, the effort to foster a greater sense of belonging than obtains in large parish contexts involves "active groups," usually trans-parochial and based on common interests than on geographical proximity.

It is at this level of the cell or the small chapel that greater focus is given to the Word of God which is closely linked with shared reflections on its relevance to daily life.

ECCLESIAL

In the context of the history of the Church's social ministry, BECs are also said to represent "alternative structures" to the Catholic action approach.[9] The latter approach presupposes the feasibility of social change within existing structures, whereas the BEC-strategy is said to aspire for genuine "social transformation."

Given the diversity of the history and current orientations of particular BEC communities, it is difficult to generalize on whether most of them indeed aspire for authentic social transformation. Several characteristics may be worth noting, though, which underline the innovative approach of BECs: (x) a collaborative tone, especially in matters of social activities and projects, with varying groups, despite differences of belief and of organization, (y) the discerning of concrete imperatives of action, including the

8. Renato A. Ocampo, "Basic Christian Communities in a Mindanao Parish: Catituan, Malangas, Zamboanga del Sur," *Kinaadman* 13 (1981) esp. 217-20.

9. Paul Steidl-Meier, "The Organization of Social Ministry," *Social Justice Ministry: Foundations and Concerns* (Asian ed.; Quezon City: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1985) 157-58.

importance of social investigation and forms of analyses, and (z) linking faith and life towards "integral evangelization."

FURTHER QUESTIONS

To go back to the PCP II text on BECs, we can now raise the following questions. First, is BEC truly only *one* of several ecclesial movements? One can cite Article 110 of the *Decrees* of PCP II which mandates the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines to issue an official statement "making it clear that they (BECs) are not simply another organization."

For many a diocesan BEC program, this point is hardly theoretical. Those charged with implementing the BEC program usually grapple with the question: should setting up the BEC program be enjoined on all parishes? or, could other forms of faith communities (charismatic groupings) serve the same objectives? It would appear, though, that the PCP II text opens itself to a differing interpretation from that Article 110 cited earlier.

If one were to place BECs in the context of PCP II's vision of the Church of the Poor, then they would probably challenge existing structures and procedures in the church's own life. In this sense, Fr. Luis Tagle's own remarks on the ideal of BECs of being "allowed to prophetically question the rest of the Philippine Church" would indeed provide these base communities the opportunity to reinvent the Church.[10]

Second, are we to take BECs as ideally centered on the Eucharist? Or, is some concession to the concrete reality of lack of priests to be taken as unchangeable?

Once more, these questions are hardly academic. Because of the alarming ratio of priests even only to the Catholic population (as well as the uneven distribution of the resources of the ministers of the Church in the various parts of the country), the centrality of the full celebration of the Eucharist will understandably be raised.

In Fr. Tagle's commentary on PCP II, he raises a question about the absence of an explicit reference to "their (BECs) origins in

10. Luis Antonio Tagle, "Discipleship in Community — the Church," in Bernier and Gabriel, eds., *Journeying*, 55.

the efforts to develop worshipping communities in areas where the scarcity of ordained ministers made Sunday eucharist impossible."[11] He rightly argues that the BEC "memory" should be kept for posterity, in the same way that we should underscore the *desideratum* of BECs as full eucharistic celebrations.

In a similar consideration, Bishop Claver discusses the same point in relation to the parish and to the present tradition regarding ordinations.

In the 1987 Synod of Bishops, he says, there is "a curious statement about the parish being the most basic center of life in the Church." If the Church is understood as a Eucharistic community, and it is the parish with its priest and the Eucharist that satisfied such an understanding, then he says that one may question the term "ecclesial" in BECs. Laity-led and -managed, BECs ordinarily centers on Holy Communion, not on the Eucharistic celebration as such. As only a quasi-ecclesial body, BECs are an incomplete church, unless the present tradition regarding ordinations is reevaluated.[12]

A third point is the predominance of BECs among grassroots-poor. Is such preferential option to be pushed as a "pastoral priority," or should there be effort not to maintain exclusivity? In one instance, the parish priest faced the dilemma in terms of reducing his presence for religious services in the town center to less than what people there were used to. This was to enable him to spend some time during the week to get to know other parishioners living in far-flung areas.

FINAL REMARKS

With these questions, we leave room for further investigation of the phenomenon of basic ecclesial communities. What PCP II has done is to turn attention to what is taking place within and without the Church today, which includes the building up of such basic communities of our people. It is our hope that a discussion of these pastoral implications would help those who

11. Ibid. 54-55.

12. Francisco A. Claver, "The Basic Ecclesial Community: Vehicle Par Excellence for Inculturation," *Discovery*. St. Louis, Mo.: Jesuit International Ministries, No. 3 (May 1993) 26-27.

have some say in their promotion to remain open in the task of creating authentic and functioning BECs.