Landas 26:1 (2012) 127–138

BEYOND BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES (BECs)

Challenges to the Reception of Communio Ecclesiology in Asia

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Filipino bishop Francisco Claver (1929–2010), whose writings and episcopal work were dedicated to the realization of Vatican II's vision, considers the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as "the new way of being church in Asia today." For him, the BECs are the most effective manifestation of the Council's communion ecclesiology as well as the most potent vehicles of the Church's much needed renewal. This article aims to evaluate Claver's assertion drawn mainly from the Philippine experience of the BECs. The theological contributions of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) will serve as framework and tools in the critique. Some of the key assertions of the FABC include the local church as agent of evangelization, the triple dialogue with religions, cultures and the poor, and participation as the mode of ecclesial life.

The article will therefore look at the challenges faced by BECs in the contemporary Philippine and Asian situation and raise some questions such as: How can BECs retain the vibrancy and potency which they enjoyed in their early years? What forms can or should BECs take in the multi-cultural and multi-religious, albeit largely poor Asian context? May BEC lend its name to new forms of communio emerging as a result of modern technology, in Asia as well as in other parts of the world? Far from giving certain and definite answers, this article simply

aims to put these questions forward in order to jumpstart a discussion around these pressing theological and practical questions.

Vatican II: Birthing of the World-Church and the Asian Church

Rahner described Vatican II as a *caesur*, a "neat break" from a culturally narrow past, from a monolithic Eurocentric Church to a truly pluriform world-Church. For him, "the Second Vatican Council is the beginning of a tentative approach by the Church to the discovery and realization of itself as world-Church." For him, this "becoming a world -Church" in Vatican II is the third period in a theologically accurate division of Church history. Just as in its earliest years, the Church underwent a transition from its inward-looking Jewish-Christian world into the vast and unfamiliar Greek-Roman world, and in the process, breaking away from cherished traditions and principles such as circumcision and the Torah; so now, it is moving from a Eurocentric, monolithic Roman Church to a multi-cultural, polycentric world-Church. This new transition demands, as before, a *caesura*, a break, an interruption in the history of salvation.[1]

Catalino Arévalo, a Filipino theologian, notes how Vatican II has borne fruit in and for the Church in Asia by way of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). When Pope Paul VI visited Manila in 1970, a group of bishops met and discussed how they could work together to implement the renewalist program of the Council. Four years later, the Asian bishops came together for the first time as the FABC. Arévalo says: "'The FABC is truly an issue of 'the grace that was the Second Vatican Council.' It has marked a decisive

[1]K. Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigations* XX: *Concern for the Church*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 78, 82. Cf. in the same volume, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," 90–102.

'turning to history,' a movement toward realizing a Church in Asia."[2] As Vatican II is for the universal Church, so is FABC for the Church in Asia. Over the 30 years that FABC has been in existence, it has developed its own theological method and vision of the church in Asia, reflected in its numerous statements and papers. These, in turn, have stimulated the theological reflection of many professional and emerging Asian theologians who are contributing to the growth of inculturated Asian theology.[3]

For Francisco Claver, S.J., a Filipino bishop, the key pastoral idea of Vatican II which gave birth to creative and effective pastoral initiatives is its thrust towards a more participatory Church. The post-conciliar projects such as inculturation, collegiality, co-responsibility, liturgical renewal and other similar projects are concrete expressions of participation: the institutional church participating more fully in the daily lives of the people, and the laity participating in shaping the life and ministry of the Church.[4] A unique aspect of this ethic of participation is the commitment of Asian Churches to dialogue. Felix Wilfred summarizes the orientation of FABC in the word "*dialogue*." For him, dialogue

> frees the Church from becoming a self-centered community, and links it with the people in all areas and dimensions of their lives. According to the bishops, dialogue in Asia needs to be pursued in three inter-related spheres: Asian religions, Asian cultures, and the immense multitude of the poor."[5]

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[2]Catalino Arévalo, "… The Time of the Heirs …," in Gaudencio Rosales, D.D. & Catalino Arévalo, S.J., *For All the Peoples of Asia* I (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), xvi. See also Edmund Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology," *FABC Papers* 106 (2003).

[3]For a summary of scholarly works on the theology of FABC, see James H. Kroeger, *Theology from the Heart of Asia: FABC Doctoral Dissertations* I (1985–1998) and II (1998–2008) (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008).

[4]Francisco Claver, "The Church in Asia: Twenty and Forty Years after Vatican II (Personal Reflections: 1985 and 2005)," *FABC Papers* 117 (2005): 74.

[5]Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact," in Gaudencio Rosales, D.D. &

Peter Phan cites the pioneering liturgical reforms, the development of indigenous theology, the efforts at interreligious dialogue and inculturation and the engagement in social reform and development in various parts of Asia as concrete instances of the reception of Vatican II in Asia.[6] Michael Amaladoss holds that inculturation and dialogue are imperatives in the conduct of evangelization in Asia.[7]

BECs: Communio Ecclesiology in Action

Francisco Claver is fully convinced that Basic Ecclesial Communities are the most compelling evidence of the reception of communio ecclesiology in Asia, particularly in the Philippines. For him, in these church communities are manifested more than in others the key elements of a renewed church according to the vision of Vatican II: dialogue, participation and co-responsibility.[8] He traces the beginnings of the BECs in the Philippines in the early 70's, when the bishops of Southern Philippines met in a regional conference (Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference or MSPC, August 1971) to reflect together on how the reforms of Vatican II may be seen enfleshed in their areas. In line with the Council's thrust towards liturgical renewal and greater lay participation in the life of the Church, the MSPC unanimously voted

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Catalino Arévalo, S.J., *For All the Peoples of Asia* I (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), xxiv–xxv.

[6]Peter Phan, "Reception of Vatican II in Asia: Historical and Theological Analysis," *FABC Papers* 117 (2005): 107–127, esp. 112–121. See also Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 2004).

[7]Michael Amaladoss, "Is There an Asian Way of Doing Theology?" *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45 (2008): 1027.

[8]Francisco Claver, *The Making of the Local Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publ., 2009), 107. What follows is a summary of Claver's presentation on the BECs in this book. Mary Fitzpatrick examines Claver's vision and theology of the local church in Mary Fitzpatrick, *Bishop Francisco F. Claver, SJ, 1972–90: On the Local Church* (Manila: De la Salle University Press, 1995).

to recommend to local bishops only two proposals for implementation: 1) the training of lay ministers for small village congregations, and 2) the improvement of the work with indigenous peoples in the region.[9] This paved the way to the formation of BECs, very much akin to the small Christian communities called Communidades de Bases in Latin America.[10] In the 1980's, dioceses in central Philippines also started forming BECs, and in the 1990's, the BEC Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines recorded over a thousand BEC clusters in the country, classified under 93 names.[11] The FABC formally acknowledged the significance of BECs and endorsed its implementation in its member countries. No record, however, could be found and no study has been made on the practise of BEC in Asia.

As Claver explains it, BECs are "worshipping communities of faith discernment-and-action at the lower levels of the Church, that try, in a participatory way, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to put life and faith together in an integrated whole."[12] This definition incorporates what, for Claver, are the elements that distinguish BECs from other church bodies. Firstly, BECs are communities guided by the pastoral method summarized as " faith-discernment-action." In these communities, the members reflect on their experiences in the light of the Word of God and discern together the course of action to which the Holy Spirit is directing them.[13] In the 70's, when the Philippines

[9]Ibid., 41–42.

[10]On the history, formation and significance of the Comunidades in the Latin American experience, see Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church,* trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986); Marcello Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church,* trans. John Drury (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

[11]Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 115.

[12]Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 110. See also Jose Marins et al., *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Church from the Roots* (Quezon City: Claretian Publ., 1983), 12–20.

[13]This is also called the "pastoral cycle of experience-reflection-action." See Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 100–101. What the FABC endorsed as

was under the grip of the Marcos dictatorship and countless innocent civilians were subjected to warrantless arrests, illegal detentions, suspicion of conniving with insurgents, and forced recruitment to paramilitary groups, the BECs provided its members an avenue in which they could make sense of their experiences of violence and injustice and come up with discerned action in response to their experience.[14]

Secondly, BECs are led and run by laypeople, thus giving them a chance to exercise directly and actively their kingly-prophetic-priestly role. Since BECs emerged in grassroots communities in far-flung villages that see their parish priest only once a month, or worse, once a year for patronal feastday, the lay-leaders take on the priest's role of presiding in the liturgy of the Word. Not only the lay-presider, but the rest of the community share their thoughts and reflections on the Word of God. Decisions as to the communal stand and action to be taken on a particular social issue are deliberated upon and made by the entire community, not by one person alone. In this way, the BEC is truly participatory in accordance with Vatican II's communio ecclesiology. The co-responsibility which must characterize the Vatican II Church is nowhere more palpable than in the BEC where members are no mere passive spectators in the liturgy, followers of ready-made decisions, or recipients of the Church's charitable works. In the BEC, lay people are actively engaged in all aspects of their Christian community life.

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the "Asian Integrated Pastoral Approach" (ASIPA) is herein adopted by the BECs. See "Asian Integrated Pastoral Approach towards a New Way of Being Church in Asia (AsIPA): Report of the Consultation on Integral Formation (Nov. 3, 1993)," in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia* II (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 107–111.

[14]Most of Claver's finest pastoral letters tackle the urgent social justice issues during the Marcos era; see F. Claver, *The Stones will Cry Out: Grassroots Pastorals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978). For a study on the Philippine experience during and after the Marcos dictatorship, see Ateneo de Manila University-Office of Research and Publications, *Memory, Truth-telling and the Pursuit of Justice: A Conference on the Legacies of the Marcos Dictatorship* (Quezon City: AdMU Office of Research and Publications, 2001).

Thirdly, in the BECs, Christians are able "to put life and faith together into an integrated whole." Inculturation and dialogue happen in its most profound sense in the BECs. For Claver, inculturation may be seen as "the ongoing and salvific dialogue between a people and the Holy Spirit in regard to their special way of being human, their culture." It is in the BECs that the people's faith encounters their concrete situation and circumstances as human beings set in a particular culture. In this encounter, faith and culture mutually influence, support or challenge each other, and in the process, enrich or purify each other.[15] For instance, the strong family ties that characterize Filipino culture serve as a reliable source of emotional support and a stable foundation of unity among family members. However, the same ties become an obstacle to the maturity of socio-political institutions when these are co-opted to maintain political dynasties and justify the practice of nepotism in government and oligarchy in civil society.[16] This is challenged when, in the BECs, members reflect on Jesus' words on loving family more than Him (Mt. 10: 37) and on the priority of doing God's will over obligation to one's family (Mt. 12: 48). As the members seriously engage in the experience-reflection-action cycle and actively participate in the life of the community, they set the stage for the Spirit's transformative action which engenders conversion within the culture and impels them to become agents of the same Good News to others.

Challenges and Prospects in the 21st Century Asia

Claver admits to his rather idealized presentation of the BECs, despite the real problems in the formation and conduct of BECs that he mentions. Nonetheless, he believes that for all the deficiencies of

[15]Claver explains the dynamics and moments of inculturation in *The Making of the Local Church*, 136–140.

[16]Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 55–56. See also Sheila S. Coronel et al., eds., *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-born Dominate Congress* (Quezon City: Phil. Center for Investigative Journalism, 2004).

the BECs in their actual practice, it has to be credited for relentlessly pursuing the vision of Vatican II's communio ecclesiology, the new way of being Church, and for being a vehicle of social transformation.[17] So that BECs can continue to be an effective manifestation of a renewed Church, they have to face the challenges of contemporary society. Claver's account of the genesis and growth of the BECs is confined mainly to the rural areas of Southern and Northern Philippines where he served as local ordinary. In its early years in the 70's and in the peak of its growth throughout the Philippines in the 80's and 90's, BECs saw their development from the liturgical to the developmental and liberational forms. In those years, when Philippine society was beset by a series of political crises, the BECs were vibrant bodies that provided people with the spiritual vision and social cohesion to struggle for social justice and human rights. However, in the early years and decade of the new millennium, BECs have had to find a new way of engaging in social issues that no longer require protest marches or non-violent assemblies, but long-term advocacies and lobbying in legislature for the enactment of laws that will ensure the protection of rights wilfully violated in the period of the dictatorship. Now that the struggle has shifted from open struggle against an oppressive dictatorship to a long-drawn campaign against corruption in government, BECs are trying to figure out how to sustain the original passion for social justice which accompanied them in their formative years.[18]

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[17]Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 123–127; Marins, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 41–54. See Mary Ann Charity Durano, *The Pastoral Vision of Francisco Claver and Orlando Quevedo on the Role of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Social Transformation within the Philippine Context*, unpublished MA Thesis (Ateneo de Manila University, 2003); "SCCs/BECs Towards a Church of Communion: Final Statement of the AsIPA 4th General Assembly (Nov. 8–15, 2006)," in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia* IV: *Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002–2006* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007), 179–185.

[18]Ivan Petrella looks at the challenges faced by base communities inspired by liberationist aims beyond the initial phase of struggle against unjust structures to maintaining and sustaining stable institutions. See I. Petrella, *The Future of*

The evolution of BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) from BCCs shows how it has dealt with the presence of non-Catholics and non-Christians in the community. Where the term "Christian" did not simply denote a religious affiliation, but also connoted an ideology, i.e., foreign and un-inculturated, it was replaced with "Ecclesial," thus giving emphasis to the priority of the assembled community regardless of religious affiliation. This shows the BECs' evolution from a religion-based community to a faith-based community without necessarily compromising its emphasis on the Gospel and the values of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, in an evolving Philippine society where non-Christians are gradually emerging as a potent force amidst a Christian majority, can BECs be re-invented to welcome even non-Christians as members? Claver did not tackle this question. Hence, in a way, his focus was limited to the traditional intra-Christian type of basic communities. Aloysius Pieris has successfully moved beyond the traditional form of BCC or BEC towards BHCs—basic human communities. Like the BECs, these BHCs are small grassroots groups who also reflect and discern the Spirit's movements through the pastoral cycle. The main difference is that the members come from different religions and the Scriptures that they read are not only the Judeao-Christian Scriptures, but also the Rig Veda, the Qu'ran, the Upanishads and other sacred texts. They do cross-Scriptural reading, allowing the various texts to shed light on each other and deepen the member's insight into their respective faiths.[19] In these BHCs, the dialogue of life and of religious experience envisioned by the FABC among adherents of the various religions in Asia becomes a concrete reality. Is this the future form of the BECs in the Philippines and in Asia?

The advent of modern technology has also revolutionized the traditional concepts of church and religion as well as belonging and

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Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); I. Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

[19]Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark Ltd, 1988), 111; Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 77–80.

participation in community. Although most Asian countries are poor in comparison to a couple of economically prosperous countries like Japan, South Korea and China, the effects of modern technology are a reality that the Asian Church has to confront. Alongside traditional church structures such as the parish, transparochial communities and BECs have sprung virtual communities in cyberspace that are very attractive especially to young people,[20] hence the popularity of online prayer guides, online retreats, and online prayer groups which count teenagers and young adults as their followers.[21] The BECs as Claver has discussed them are mainly groups of adults. Many young people do not find from the parish or from the BECs the sense of belonging that they feel in these virtual communities, yet the FABC has described the Asian Church as the Church of the Youth. It acknowledged that for the most part, Asia is a continent of the young and, therefore, an urgent priority for the Asian Church.[22]

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[20]On the dynamics of the cybercommunities in terms of belief and belonging, see Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 247–256. Ward tackles the problematic of the "ex-carnate" or "dis-embodied" nature of engagement in such virtual communities and the "realized eschatology" that lies behind these types of communities. See also Ward's other works where he explores the relationship between a post-modern, post-secular culture and religion, and develops considerably the methodological basis of my engagement between theology and culture: *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2004).

[21]Some examples of these are: Online Holy Week Retreat given by a Filipino Jesuit, Fr. Johnny Go (http://www.phjesuits.org/features/1252-while-standing-by-and-fence-sitting [accessed May 3, 2012]), a similar format offered by the American Jesuits (http://www.loyolapress.com/lent-retreat.htm [accessed May 3, 2012]), and a Catholic online community already on its 11th year (http://www.ecatholic2000.com/index2.html [accessed May 3, 2012]).

[22]See "Message and Resolutions of the Asian Bishops' Meeting (November 29, 1970)," in Gaudencio Rosales, D.D. & Catalino Arévalo, S.J., *For All the Peoples of Asia* I (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 3–10, on 6. See also the results of the consultation on youth ministry in the Asian Churches: "The Youth of Asia Envisioning the Fullness of Life and Human Dignity in the Church,"

Hence, this is an urgent challenge to the Church, both in its theology and in its pastoral practice. If the Asian Church born of the Council's communio ecclesiology will continue to be participatory in the 21st century, then the youth of Asia should feel themselves co-responsible for the future of the Asian Church. Can one speak of virtual communities as BECs too? When these virtual communities can come together in a chatroom to pray together and can be mobilized to campaign for reform in governments and in the Churches, are they not performing the liturgical-praxis function of the BECs? Do not these communities foster participation among their members and inculturation in their own way? Can we therefore speak of these online communities as a new form of ecclesial community? What are the problems and complexities, both in theology and in practice, of lending to these communities the status of an ecclesial community?

Towards Continuing Renewal

Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, holds that Vatican II was

> "a Pentecost of violent renewal" because of its far-reaching decisions, which contained an imperative to change the whole Church structurally and attitudinally, with regard to its lifestyle and worship, ministry and theology, so as to be a credible witness and a readable sign before the contemporary world.[23]

Pieris adds: "The commitment to maintain that momentum of this renewal on the frontiers of the Church is exactly what fidelity to the Council as well as the reception of the Council means for us today." The Churches are being challenged to sharpen their powers of imagination in order to rethink conventional church structures and pursue the path of the BECs towards the realization of a new way of being Church. The local churches play a crucial role in advancing the vision of Vatican II's

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in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia* II (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 101–105.

[23]A. Pieris, "Vatican II: A Crisigenic Council with Unwritten Agenda," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42/1–2 (2005): 15, 22.

communio ecclesiology. By taking initiatives to implement the reforms of the Council, the local Churches respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit, the dynamic element in the Church.

But this dynamic element in the Church blows wherever it wils (Jn. 3: 8). Hence, the Church must always be attentive to the promptings of this Spirit. Can it be that the Spirit is leading the Church towards recognizing the new forms of BECs such as the basic human communities (BHCs)? If God is to be found and loved and served in all things, as St. Ignatius of Loyola held, could he be actively present in the world wide web as well, and there creating communities of faith? May we, therefore, speak of basic virtual communities (BVCs) such that whether in its traditional form or in its alternative form as BHCs, or in its emerging forms ushered in by modern technology, BECs play a crucial role for the continuing reception of Vatican II's communio ecclesiology? Claver held that with all the challenges that BECs have to face in 21st century Philippines and Asia, "the reality of the BECs as we have them now is in fact one of people struggling toward those ideals … (however), the mere struggling is enough in a church which Vatican II says is in need of continual reformation."[24] Hence, the struggle to build BECs in whatever form conducive to the promotion of the communio ecclesiology must continue with a view towards ensuring the vibrancy of the Asian churches in the years to come.

[24]Claver, *The Making of the Local Church*, 126–127.