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BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Some Missiological Challenges

Manuel G. Gabriel

Allow me to present the missiological framework that I will use in reading the development of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the Philippines; it is none other than the task of "New Evangelization and Conversion."

Threefold Task in the Mission of the Church

In *Redemptoris Missio,* John Paul II's encyclical that seeks to establish the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, the Holy Father presents three tasks or critical sets of activities that are vital to the realization of the Church's mission today (cf. RM 33).

The *first task* is directed to "peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and His Gospel are not known" or to new Christian communities that have not yet incarnated the faith in their environment and, at the same time, have not proclaimed it to others. This is missionary activity or *missio ad gentes,* properly speaking.

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The *second task* refers to the evangelization of other Christian communities. Young Churches must manifest fervor and seriousness in practicing their faith. They must try to bear witness to the Gospel in their given milieu and to respond to the mission entrusted to them by Christ. This task covers what John Paul II calls the activities that will reinforce the maturation in faith of the young Churches and Christian communities.

The *third task* pertains to "countries with ancient Christian roots" or in some cases to younger Churches, where Christians have "lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel." What is needed in this alarming situation is a "New Evangelization" or "re-evangelization."

It is to be noted that all these three tasks are of one origin and one purpose, the mission of the Lord himself. The Church's *missionary activities, pastoral care,* and *"New Evangelization"* are mutually interdependent. They exist among the various saving activities of the Church (cf. RM 34).

Task of New Evangelization and Conversion

Later in the encyclical, John Paul II simply refers to the task of a "new evangelization" or "re-evangelization" (cf. RM 34). However, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) is more explicit in articulating the conceptual linkage between new evangelization and conversion. This is clearly seen in the Decrees of PCP II (Article I). It declared that the forging and implementation of a five-to-ten-year National Pastoral Plan would be a process of "new evangelization" and "conversion." The new evangelization should bring about a change of paradigm, a shift of pastoral orientation and priorities in the Church, a collective conversion of mind and heart among all the faithful of the Church. It is a basic conversion that is being referred to, a change in worldview and consciousness, a new way of living the Christian faith.

Parameters and Indicators

To illustrate more concretely the practical import of the concrete task of a new evangelization and conversion, it is helpful to present some indicators:

1. Shift from Center-based Concerns to the Marginalized and Unevangelized. To re-evangelize the established Churches, there is a necessity to move out of the center of power and go to those who have been disempowered, to shift from the hub of tradition and influence to the recipients of largesse from the top. The Churches have to *start from the context and life setting* of those who have been marginalized not only by social institutions, but particularly by the institutionalized Church systems. Hence, PCP II has enacted a decree that has instituted pastoral planning to start from the barrios to the parish, from the diocese to the region, leading to a National Pastoral Plan, covering a period of five-to-ten years. The deeper concern of the statute is for the Church to take the vantage point of the marginalized and unevangelized in its process of re-evangelizing these communities.

2. Shift from Individual Sanctification to the Re-evangelization of Cultures. When the Church talks of the "new evangelization," it puts a concrete, specific focus on the significance of inculturation. John Paul II's discourse to the International Council for Catechesis (September 26, 1992) stated this in no uncertain terms: "the task of inculturation as the integral diffusion of the Gospel and its subsequent translation into thought and life, still constitutes the heart, the means and scope to the new evangelization."

The PCP II documents, on the other hand, stress the evangelization of culture particularly by stressing the development of an "inculturated and holistic" Filipino spirituality. The inculturation of Christian faith must take into account the heart and soul of the Filipino people, their spirit and character as a nation. This is evangelization of cultures at its very core, inculturation in its full realization.

3. Shift from the Uncritical Absorption of the Forces of Modernity and Globalization to the Full Evangelization of Modernity and the Modernization Process. It seems paradoxical that the Christian socio-philosophical framework that has given birth to the rise of modernity and globalization now renders the living of that faith irrelevant and ineffective. Christian believers in this age find themselves struggling amid the pressures and demands of secular living.

On the other hand, the forces of globalization seem to be relentless in uprooting the cultural foundation of small communities particularly among poor, developing countries. Globalization is set to provide a new technocratic culture with its own language and lifestyle such that indigenous, local communities cannot but succumb to the might of their influence.

How do we evangelize this modernization process? Where do we begin? Where do we go? The process of the new evangelization and conversion seems to hold the answers to these questions, coming as they do from the experiences of believers struggling to live their faith in a modernized and modernizing milieu.

As a beginning, Christian communities will have to recognize that the modernization process in itself is ambiguous. It is neither good nor bad. They have therefore to acquire and adapt processes of integral formation where they can discern the nature and impact of modernization and the dimensions of globalization. Being able to establish basic communities of faith and to undergo the process of value formation redounds eventually to a critical responsiveness to the challenges of modernization processes.

4. Shift from Poverty Alleviation to the Promotion of Peace Processes in the Task of Re-evangelization. The new evangelization process encounters not only the dire poverty that the marginalized poor suffer from, but also the impact of the present political instability in the world on their security and destiny. Poverty alleviation and justice are the twin faces of integral human development. But, given the global phenomenon of escalating terrorism, the

issues of poverty and justice have found a new context and perspective.

Considering the global dimension of terrorism, many local Churches have adopted a "peace process" as a new strategy that combines the aspects of development and justice. We cannot be effective in eradicating poverty and injustice without directly aiming at the process of peace-building at the very grassroots, among the peoples of varying cultures and faiths. Fostering the peace process seems to be the main strategy for the integral development of communities in our diverse societies today.

How is the Church to re-evangelize these communities? Without yielding to the temptation to cower in fear, what can be done so that re-evangelization is effectively anchored in peace processes?

These are the questions that BECs in the Philippines will have to reckon with. The answers that they discern will integrate them into the international effort to build terrorism-free societies and communities.

5. Shift from Faith-Information to Integral Faith Formation. The new evangelization brings with it a new paradigm or perspective. Formation has to link faith and life to the context and setting of communities, using the light of the Gospel in its reading of the signs. It integrates the mind-heart-body components of the human person, as well as the person-community-society levels of human life.

Most importantly, such integral faith formation is rooted in the concrete faith-experiences that are found in the communities. Through reflection on these experiences, people grow and they are enabled to conceptualize, analyze and develop their critical processes. This experience leads them to transform the very conditions that have oppressed them.

Integral faith formation, therefore, is empowering the lay faithful to become subjects of the task of evangelization and not mere objects of a banking-type of religious education. It equips them to evangelize the secular arena of Christian life, equipped with the convic-

tion that the Spirit of the Risen Christ will always be with them until "the end of time."

Missiological Challenges to the BECs in the Philippines

Using these parameters of the new evangelization and conversion, we now look at BEC development in the Philippines and identify crucial challenges to their birth, growth, and expansion. Given the varying experiences of BECs in the country and without prejudice to their unique historical origins and pastoral-theological presuppositions, the use of these indicators could facilitate the identification of what may determine the future of BECs in the country.

1. The Urgent Demand for Shared "Conversion." The BEC growth in the Philippine Church from the 1960s to the present has evolved from different concerns and theologies. The sixties were focused on how to implement Vatican II's description of the Church as a "people of God," painfully moving from the model of the Church as an institution. The seventies were confronted with the issues raised by the First Quarter Storm generation: the call to organize the poor, deprived and oppressed in order to achieve full liberation from the socio-political structures that dehumanized them. The formation of BECs has acquired a political relevance, and the Church has truly immersed herself with the grassroots. The eighties struggled to resolve the identity of the BECs, changing the name *Basic Christian Communities* to *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, in order to stress the direct link between these grassroots communities and the local Church. This shift was seen as the best follow-up to the "people power" manifestation at EDSA I. BECs were deemed to be the way the Church could continue the gains of the EDSA spirit. And in the 1990s, PCP II's agenda for renewal put the BEC on center stage, defining it as a way to achieve a participatory Church, a Church of the Poor.

Consequently, for more than forty years, BECs have developed in varying contexts. They have been nurtured by the different

ecclesiological orientations of their organizers and promoters, be they bishops and priests, missionaries, religious or lay leaders. They have grown in leaps and bounds, depending on the socio-political temper and tempests of the times.

At this present juncture, all BEC proponents have to level with themselves and ask: Do we have a common understanding of BEC identity and the mission in the Church? Do the bishops and clergy, religious and concerned laity share a common paradigm in making BECs a "new force for evangelization," a "new way of being Church"? From my perspective, this is the first challenge that the framework of re-evangelization invites us to consider.

The National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR), convened in January 2001, ten years after PCP II, has called for conversion in its introduction to its pastoral priorities. The assembly statement declared that to achieve "a more participatory Church, a Church more authentically of the Poor, and a truly missionary Church," the entire Church must undergo a "radical conversion of mind and heart" (NPCCR, 7). The stress is on the *whole Church.* BECs will not fully and effectively thrive if bishops and priests, the religious and missionaries, the grassroots' leaders and the BECs themselves do not experience a change of paradigm, a shared conversion. The local Churches where BECs have become "a new way of being Church" have done so because all the stakeholders (bishop, religious, priests and laity) have journeyed together in their life of faith.

On the other hand, bishops and parish priests whose paradigm of the Church and its mission still fits the pre-Vatican II mold have tended to discourage even the inception of BECs in the parish communities. Some merely pay lip service to it. Others, if not the majority, half-heartedly encourage their existence, only as they reinforce the traditional practices and hierarchical loyalties. A shared paradigm shift remains a challenge for all sectors of the Church to embrace.

2. Adopting the Vantage Point of the Marginalized and Unevangelized. The *task of re-evangelization* directs the Church to *be always missionary* to Christians who need to renew and revive their

faith, and to those neglected and deprived by the evangelization process. Re-evangelization has a clear, strong bias for the unevangelized in societies and for those marginalized, especially in faith.

The BECs in the Philippines need to look at themselves squarely and confront critical problems apropos to the unevangelized and marginalized in faith. As human communities, BECs go through a process of institutionalization. They are formally organized, linked to the parish and diocesan systems. The leaders and ministers undergo formation and training and, in due time, possess a high profile in the bigger community, with newly-acquired positions of power and status.

The BEC units also meet regularly, to deliberate on matters affecting their environment and setting. They conduct prayer meetings and Bible studies, and find mutual support for their problems, especially those affecting their finances and family life. For years, the process of institutionalization continues. And sooner than they realize, the BECs may already be isolated from the mainstream of the grassroots and unevangelized. Rather than being a witness to the Lord's saving presence among them, they have become exclusive in their concerns, protective of their comfort zones.

The challenge of re-evangelization should draw out these BECs from being fully institutionalized so that they are again motivated to reach out, serve and transform the world of the unevangelized. The BEC leadership needs to fix its gaze on the "uninvolved" in their respective communities, the "no longer involved" due to interpersonal issues or ecclesial conflicts, those outside the fold who cannot and will never get in, and the families of different faiths and religions. It is from these sectors that BECs can draw new life and direction, avoiding in the process the pitfalls of institutionalized thinking and living out of the faith.

3. Re-evangelization of Culture and the BEC. The third challenge that the task of re-evangelization and conversion urges BECs to address refers to the relationship between Christ and culture, particularly the question of inculturation.

In *Ecclesia in Asia*, the Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II that expounds on "Jesus Christ the Savior and His mission of love and service in Asia," the pope highlights the dire need to present the mystery of Christ to the local Churches in Asia "according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking" (EA 20h). For John Paul II, culture is the "vital space within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel" (EA 21a). Persons and societies interact with one another in the context of culture and cultures. And, the transformation of cultures will have immediate impact and effect on the individuals and communities. Hence, the local Churches today have to take into account the vital task of evangelizing culture and cultures through the process of inculturation.

There are two concerns relevant to the BECs and the task of inculturation that need to be underlined in view of Philippine society today. The first is the strong influence of the *"showbiz" subculture* in mainstream Philippine culture.

It should be a cause of alarm to the Church that not only has the "showbiz" lingo and lifestyle affected and altered the Filipinos' way of life, but also that more people in show business or the entertainment industry have become endorsers of various consumer products. They portray themselves as those who will save the country from poverty and oppression. And for the past thirty years, some of these personalities have also become stalwart proponents of religious fundamentalism. The so-called "born again" Christians have taken root among all sectors of Philippine society because the leading evangelists, those whose lives have been transformed by their faith in Jesus and in Jesus alone, are the "mega-stars" and stars of the showbiz industry.

Among those deeply influenced by the *"born-again" personalities* are the *impressionable young people* today. The recent research and studies on Filipino youth—conducted by the Ateneo de Manila University, McCann Youth Study 2000, and the CBCP Commission on Youth—have all shown that the stars that the youth look up to as "role models" are those "born again" Christians whose lives they emulate.

The issue at hand is not so much the theological validity of the "born again" sects but the kind of faith that they effectively offer to an increasing number of Filipinos. *It is a faith that is highly privatized, a concept of salvation that is centered on Jesus alone, where only Scripture is the source of revelation.* It is a kind of *faith that tends to negate the value of culture* and whatever strikes the human and the secular.

The inculturation of faith into the general culture of people has been effectively neutralized by a faith-life focused on the feeling of being saved by one's individual faith in Jesus alone. The dynamic relationship between Christ and culture has been simplified by a worship that guarantees material blessings and prosperity. The intrinsic value of culture is negated in favor of a one-sided, fundamentalist-interpreted Gospel.

Among the sectors that are badly hit by all this, the youth are a special concern. They are the ones who have consciously and unconsciously caught the values and worldview, the lifestyle and subculture of people in the entertainment and sports industries; these individuals have become "role models" and "idols worth emulating."

What alternatives do BECs have to offer? The more basic question is: Has there been a significant presence of the youth in the BECs? Has their role been adequately recognized and given effective encouragement? These are concerns that BECs have to look into to ensure the continuity of the Church's mission among and with the youth.

4. Re-evangelization of Modernity, Globalization and the BECs. The task of re-evangelization brings to the fore the eventual confrontation of our Christian faith with the modernization process and the state of globalization in our contemporary world. We live in societies whose vital plan is being shaped by modernity and globalization. They are characterized by "anonymity" and massification, by mobility and utilitarianism. What do we do to re-evangelize these life-forces in our societies?

While BECs might all the more be needed vis-à-vis this kind of society because they promote more personal interactions and a sense

of belonging, as well as greater mutual support and witnessing, another phenomenon persists. This reality is focused on the transformation of rural communities into new urban centers that tend to promote self-contained homes and houses, families and individuals. What kind of BECs need to be organized among such new urban centers? Are there other models of BECs, as some BEC proponents advocate? Typical attempts have been made in schools and office-based BECs. How is their ecclesiality to be understood and lived?

Likewise, the globalization process that is sweeping all nations in the world tends to create a homogenous culture, one that thrives in consumerism and technocratic manipulation. What happens to the BEC's emphasis on respect for the variety of cultures, on the process where the Gospel of Jesus Christ gets truly incarnated into the diversity of the human condition? What do we do to the rootedness of the BECs in the local life-setting, language and cultural arts, history and identity? In both cases, BECs do play a very urgent role, namely, to guarantee the task of being Church that focuses on deep personal, faith-based interactions, amid the modernization and urbanization process.

5. Re-evangelization and Peace Process Through BECs. The challenge of the peace process in our country, through poverty alleviation and education for justice, knocks persistently at the heart of the BECs. After all, the natural setting and normal womb for the peace process should be grassroots communities, the people at the base, where there is cultural contiguity. Without these communities, the peace process becomes a theological opinion under discussion in the classroom, or some political agenda in international fora, a blueprint on the desk of local officials and development workers.

The cultivation and strengthening of BECs can hasten the peace process because it is in these communities that the social and racial traumas can be healed, that the element of trust can be re-established, and that the rebuilding of life can begin. BECs will have to recognize and accept this daunting task and challenge: *peace process* among the people, where they travel on the rough, winding road that leads to their full, integral development.

Conclusion

Like contours in the landscape, all this presentation has achieved is a general discussion of the key challenges that await the evangelizing mission of BECs in our country.

The paradigm of "New Evangelization and Conversion" has provided the essential signposts to the fundamental question: *How do BECs evangelize?*

BECs are indeed a strong "force for evangelization" (RM 51) in all local Churches today. BECs still remain a strong sign of hope for the Church of the future.