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REKINDLING THE BEC FLAME
Questions and Reflections

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This 2004 mission symposium has three distinct components, all focusing on the evangelizing mission and potential of the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC). As envisioned by the sponsoring body, the Philippine Association of Catholic Missiologists (PACM), two speakers would each address a pivotal dimension of the theme; their presentations would be followed by a discussion period, during which the audience would have an opportunity to delve more deeply into the pastoral dimensions of the topic. This third phase would be concluded with a final, integrating synthesis.

The first presentation by Ma. Fe Mendoza focused on the formation of "authentic community" as a prerequisite for any depth growth in the BECs; insights from the thought of Bernard Lonergan into human authenticity and community shaped the discourse.[1] Manuel

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[1]Fe T. Mendoza, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: Authentic Formation and Interreligious Dialogue: A Lonerganian Perspective* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2001).

G. Gabriel, using the missiological framework of "New Evangelization and Conversion," sought to read the development of BECs in the Philippines; the speaker also outlined five key missiological challenges to BECs within the local Church of the Philippines.[2]

This piece notes the rich highlights of the discussion period, which reflect the concerns of the Mindanao-based audience with its more than three-decade experience of forming, living, and renewing the BECs in their midst.[3] It provides an overview synthesis to the entire deliberations of the mission symposium. It is noteworthy that all three presenters (Mendoza, Gabriel, and Kroeger) have lengthy BEC experience both in Mindanao and on the national level; all have completed doctoral studies in missiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and are active members in the PACM.

Exploring the Mission Potential of the BEC Movement

Participant: As a religious sister, I have previously attended some mission symposia, but I see the need for additional gatherings where the lay leaders, bishops, priests and religious can come together for in-depth discussions on the BECs and their role in evangelization. The content of Sr. Mendoza's presentation was challenging; she held out to us the ideal of authentic community. If we do not follow Christ's law of love, which includes his passion, death, and resurrection, we squander everything in the BECs. We also face great challenges from the media that takes a "showbiz" popularity approach to education and government, to life in general. How are we really go-

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[2]Manuel G. Gabriel, *Towards Church Renewal and Spirituality in BCC: A Manual for the Initial Formation of BCC Leaders* (Quezon City: Lay Formation Institute, 1985).

[3]James H. Kroeger, *The Philippine Church and Evangelization: 1965-1984* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1985), 373-89; "BCCs and the Philippine Church," *World Mission Magazine* 10:9 (Oct 1998): 4.

ing to make the BECs instruments of evangelization in this situation? What will be our guiding paradigm for BEC formation? What are our qualifications—if we hope to engage in BEC ministry? Are we willing to make genuine sacrifices? It is easy to talk about a paradigm shift, but are we willing to personally invest ourselves in the BECs? As seminarians, religious, and priests, are we really able to identify with the ordinary people and "speak their language"? Are we really being authentically missionary in our approaches to the BECs?

Gabriel: Thank you very much for those probing questions. First, I believe that your idea is very much on target; lay leaders in the BECs, bishops, priests and religious must sit down together and explore their understanding of the mission of the Church.[4] I can testify that there is a real openness among bishops to understand better the ramifications of evangelization. The CBCP Episcopal Commission on Mission and the National Mission Council have taken these questions to heart. The "mission of the Church" has to be clarified and deepened; there is the need for "new evangelization" and genuine conversion. Formation programs in seminaries and religious houses clearly must have a mission focus; the role of Catholic schools often needs a clearer focus. In a word, all sectors of the Church need to collaborate in this endeavor.

BECs are now being presented to us as the "new way of being Church"; they are the most fundamental unit of the local Church. BECs have great potential for effective evangelization. Considering all the various possibilities, BECs are the best vehicle for the evangelization of the marginalized.

Mendoza: It is striking that many religion teachers in Catholic schools express their frustrations and often think about quitting; they feel that their message often falls on deaf ears. We have to remember

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[4]Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos, "Community for What? The Goal of Evangelization," *Emmanuel* 97:8 (Oct 1991): 438-41, 452-53; Martin R. Tripole, "Is the Church Primarily Mission or Community?" *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 82:10 (Jul 1982): 52-62.

some basics. Our first teachers are our parents. However, teachers in the schools are also very important for the formation of values. And what about the seminarians in the audience? As future teachers, will you be effective in forming values—both through your preaching and lifestyle?

Participant: As a priest I appreciate the searching questions asked by the first sister-participant. I am inspired to search more deeply. I know that many priests, sisters, and BEC leaders are really thirsting for in-depth formation on mission and evangelization. They are frustrated when the discussion on mission centers so much on the October mission collection; where are some creative initiatives on "mission formation?" I would like to hear the thoughts of some of the young people here; based on the two presentations, what are your insights and questions?

Participant: I am a lay person, working in a diocese for thirteen years in the organization of the BECs. I agree with Msgr. Gabriel's position that if we do not have a *shared* conversion and a *shared* theology, everything will collapse in the end. I recall that the Claretian model of BEC that I experienced was very "people-oriented"; it was effective. Eucharist was a very central component; much formation was given. However, when there was a change in the parish priest, a different program was introduced. We started again at square one. Then some missionary sisters came, and they introduced another approach. It is also my experience that in some places the BEC today is becoming only an institution. I want to ask the presenters: Can you propose common modules for BEC formation that are built from a shared theology and a shared conversion?

Gabriel: Your question is: How we can assure that there is a shared conversion in the local Church? I recall that the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) stated that the Church in the Philippines "shall put itself in a more active state of mission" (Article I, no. 1) and this will be done "by forging and implementing a five-to-ten-year National Pastoral Plan." This is to start from below and reach all levels of the Church; this is to be a process of new

evangelization and conversion. The goal is to build up the local Church and achieve an inculturated spirituality.[5] The words are clear, but the process, moving from below to above, has not been achieved. There have been attempts, but they often have not been linked into the grassroots. Then, when a change in personnel takes place, the individual's own theology and consciousness (and biases) enter into the BECs. A true pastoral planning process has not been implemented; often, there is no common, guiding pastoral vision in the diocese.

Secondly, we cannot be looking for uniformity. What we are searching for is "shared direction." Recall that there were two gatherings of the National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace (NASSA) [1997 and 1999] during which participants came from all over the Philippines; all the many models of BEC were represented. After many days of discussion, it was agreed that there can be no model or models that are applicable to everyone and all situations. The needs, the situation, the struggle of each diocese and parish will shape the form of the BEC. Thus, the *response in faith* is what ultimately shapes the BEC. This is where *integral faith formation* must enter the picture. This is where the local situation of justice and peace comes in. What is central is the surfacing of the main direction. You must also consider the dynamics of both *developing and sustaining* the BECs. NASSA has developed a fine, three-day workshop on the sustainability of BECs. These kinds of consultations are definitely part of BEC ministry—to arrive at a common, shared understanding. So, the ideal is not uniformity; it is unity among diversity; it is a shared vision among diverse community experiences.[6]

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[5]Renato A. Ocampo, "Pastoral Implications of Basic Ecclesial Communities: A Commentary on the PCP II Text," *Landas* 8:1 (Jan 1994): 27-35.

[6]Ted Gresh, *Basic Christian Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1977); Amado L. Picardal, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: An Ecclesiological Perspective* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1995).

Mendoza: We must admit that it is very difficult to accept a renewed vision, and this includes our BEC vision. I recall Lonergan's words: "The principle of progress is liberty." It is the freedom of the men and women "on the spot," in the actual situation. We are familiar with the expression: *kada pari, hari* (every priest is king). This is often the complaint of BEC leaders: when the parish priest changes, then the paradigm also changes. Then the BEC leaders do not know what to do. How are we really going to move together? The historian Arnold Toynbee says: When you notice great shifts in civilization or culture, you should look for the "creative minorities" who foster this change. It will not be a large group of religious having a conference on BECs that will bring about change; one needs people who are willing to begin even though it will be bloody. Genuine, authentic BECs begin in this way.

Participant: It is true that BECs began in faith communities; they emerged from the desire of people to belong to this local faith community. It has happened in some places that the local Church authorities began to formulate a long list of "requirements" for a group to be recognized as a BEC. These rules and regulations became very institutionalized; sacraments and Church services became linked to fulfilling many requirements (e.g., if a local community does not have its own catechist, the priest will not come for the fiesta; if individuals do not have a BEC "membership certification," they will be denied the sacrament of marriage, etc.). How can we call the BEC an "evangelizing community" when laws seem to dominate and they are imposed upon people who have never really been well evangelized to begin with? Sometimes, people feel trapped.

Gabriel: It is good to recall that the origins of the BECs are similar to the origins of the early Gospel communities. They begin in faith, centered on Jesus and his passion, death, and resurrection, the paschal mystery. That is why the birth of the Church (ecclesiogenesis) is through the BECs. Look at the letters of Paul; he formed communities around the Word of God and the Eucharist. It is also valid to say that the BECs were part of the strategy of the missionaries: they formed communities, set up barrio chapels, they made the Word of

God and the Eucharist the center of community life.[7] So, let us not think that the forming of communities (we call them BECs) is a new strategy.

I know that here in Mindanao the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) was very instrumental in promoting BECs. MSPC was seeking to implement the vision of the Church as "People of God." It was a shift from a highly institutionalized vision to a communitarian vision. Here in the Davao area, the missionaries and local clergy sought to make this shift. However, times have changed. There were the effects of the martial law years, narrated by Sister Fe. Many BCCs (they were still called "Basic Christian Communities" at that time) faced great difficulties. They tried to respond to the Vatican II call to read the "signs of the times." There was the turbulence of the 1970s, the people power of the 1980s. The BECs were struggling to be truly present in the lives of people living with all these societal and political pressures. Out of all these events, different forms and experiences of communities emerged. All this emphasizes the urgency to sit down and reflect: Where are we going? Really, what is the paradigm shift? Regardless of our beginnings, how do we now confront the challenges? Yes, I agree with you regarding the danger of institutionalizing BECs that are cut off from the very mission for which they were established.

Participant: We have seen the need for the paradigm shift in our vision of the BECs. However, the central question is: How are we going to make this paradigm shift? We know the necessity and we have the desire, but *how* are we to go about it?

Gabriel: There are three things that I find important in bringing about transformation or change. The first thing is rootedness in the vision and mission of Christ; it is he who defines what we are to do in the Church. The second aspect is being rooted in the situation and the people you are serving; you must share people's lives and situa-

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[7]Catalino G. Arévalo, "The Church as a Community of Faith," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 20:1 (1983): 40-47.

tions, their hopes and struggles. The third element is the *how*. This only comes third and concerns the "tools" one will use to produce change. Theologians today speak about "doing theology" and the inductive method. Change comes as one engages in pastoral planning, linking the ideal and vision with concrete life realities; it also demands that the grassroots and marginalized are included in the process—right from its inception.[8] Pastoral planning also means using Scriptures to enlighten the present context.

Many strategies can be adopted, depending on what you wish to achieve. For dioceses it is necessary that the *entire diocese* undergo a pastoral planning process; the *whole system* must undergo the process of renewal and conversion. In brief, this is the *how* of effectively promoting BECs. Let me just add one observation. Frequently, one has to analyze both the positive, as well as negative motivations of people involved in this process; one often does meet resistance to implementing the BECs. When you begin to initiate change, there will be resistance; thus, it is necessary to plan for change.

Participant: I am the pastoral director in our diocese, and I get many complaints from priests regarding the presence of various "faith communities" in the parishes. We have tried to analyze the documents of PCP II on this question, but we did not find any help on how the "faith communities" could be harmonized with the BECs. Many such groups (Neo-Catechumenal Way, Couples for Christ, *Bukas Loob sa Diyos*, etc.) claim that they are really BECs. How can we seek to "harmonize" the BECs and these "faith communities"?

Gabriel: First, it is necessary to distinguish between these various groups and the BECs. The groups may be ministries or organizations of renewal, but they cannot properly be called "local Churches" or BECs. The word "basic" has two senses; the sociological meaning of basic is that it is the grassroots or the *masa*. These "faith groups"

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[8]Orlando B. Quevedo, "The Basic Ecclesial Community as a Church Model for Asia," in *A Church on the Threshold*, ed. Michael T. Seigel (Rome: SEDOS, 1998), 193-204.

are a special community, but they are not "basic." The second meaning of "basic" is theological; the base community is seen to be the most fundamental unit of being local Church. It is worthwhile to refer to the 1977 FABC Colloquium on Ministries in the Church.[9] There the Asian bishops talk about the three levels of being local Church: (a) the diocese, (b) the parish, and (c) the basic Christian community. All three must be interrelated. And, the most basic is the BEC. So, where do various groups, associations, mandated organizations, and "faith communities" enter?

Ecclesia in Asia (EA 25d-e) gives a good principle to follow; these groups must be integrated into parish/diocesan life. They must not become "parallel churches"; the goal is to be "well integrated into the life and mission of the parish and Diocese" (EA 25e). In some places, the renewal groups find this very hard to accept, since they have been so used to being organized and to function as "parallel churches." PCP II (Nos. 610-13) is very explicit in noting how to organize these "faith communities." They should be conceived in the spirit of the BEC; they should be aligned to the BECs, particularly in their ministries. These groups have their own charisms, but they are to be at the service of the entire local Church. Members of these groups should participate actively in their local BECs; they should not use the BECs as "fishing grounds" for new members for their special groups. This is a difficult challenge, particularly since many of these "faith communities" have provided a true "conversion experience" (which many BECs have not given—often because of their overly structured set-up). That is why the loyalty of many renewed Catholics today is to their movement, not to the local Church. Clear, focused direction and alternative sources of renewal must be provided by parishes and BECs. These are some key points regarding the crux of this challenge today.

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[9] James H. Kroeger, "Theology of Local Church: FABC Perspectives," in *Becoming Local Church: Historical, Theological and Missiological Essays* (Quezon City: Claretian, 2003), 31-54.

Mendoza: I recently attended a pastoral assembly in one diocese, during which they confronted this very problem. Representatives of all parties were present, and genuine dialogue took place. Dialogue is a key dimension of the building-up of the local Church; dialogue is more effective than statements that outline the expected behavior of people from these "faith communities." Remember that the Holy Spirit also works in these faith communities. So, I say: Let a thousand flowers bloom, but also, let there be dialogue.

Synthesis and Integration

Kroeger: It is now my pleasant task to offer an integrating synthesis to the discussions we have had on the evangelizing role of the BECs in the local Church of the Philippines. I have organized my thoughts around five specific themes, areas of insight and concern for rekindling the enthusiasm and commitment of Church personnel in fostering truly missionary BECs.

1. BECs as Communities of Faith. One participant questioned the *how* of fostering BECs. The response of Gabriel was to highlight the necessity of being "rooted in the faith." One clear pillar for building BECs is to be anchored in the vision and mission of Christ. Gabriel also emphasized the need to be rooted in the people and their situation; this is another pillar. We have to be very clear about the kind of communities we seek to form. They are to be a *communio de Trinitatae,* formed in the likeness of the love relationship of the Trinity; they are also to be a *communio de hominibus,* formed from the people and their concrete situations. These two dimensions must be integrally linked into all BECs. In a word, BECs emerge from a faith-response. As Mendoza mentioned, "We achieve our authenticity in self-transcendence." Never forget that BECs are faith-communities. If there is over-institutionalization with many laws, regulations, and procedures, then BECs can lose their identity and focus. BECs must be grounded in love—of God and fellow-Christians; otherwise, they will lose their way.

BECs are really to be "icons of the Trinity," God's love made manifest in concrete community. The BEC process must start "from the beginning," from a Trinitarian vision. As I was thinking about my response, some words of that old song taken from *The Sound of Music* came to my mind: "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. When you read, you begin with A-B-C; when you sing, you begin with Do-Re-Mi." So, "when you form B-E-C, you begin with the Tri-ni-ty." Whatever you may think of my "*Sound-of-Music* Theology," we must admit that BECs are fundamentally faith communities; they emerge from faith and their goal is to strengthen the faith of the participants. In BECs, people are evangelized; they are also to become active evangelizers.

2. A Paradigm Shift. A second theme I heard today frequently focused on the need for a paradigm shift in BEC ministry. Yes, over the last forty years as we have tried to receive and implement the Second Vatican Council, there has been a paradigm shift. In terms of ecclesiology, we are moving (or at least struggling to move) from a "universalist" ecclesiology to an ecclesiology of the local Church, from an ecclesiology "from above" to an ecclesiology "from below." We hold that these are *basic* ecclesial communities; we opt for an ecclesiology "from below" as our starting point. This "new way of being Church" demands the development of common meanings and directions among people at the base.

Related to this theme is another question I heard frequently: Are seminaries, catechetical centers, religious education programs, and novitiates really "houses of formation" for this new way of thinking? Do they propagate this BEC way of being Church; do they promote a "renewed integral evangelization"? Has the new paradigm become operative?

3. BEC: An Instrument of Renewal. Our discussion has asserted that BECs are intimately connected with renewal: renewal of individuals, communities, dioceses; renewal of parish life and structures. This does not primarily mean that BECs are now going to provide more programs, more services, more formation, demand more

expenses, etc.; everyone will become exhausted in the process. BECs foster renewal by engaging people in serving one another; they become "communities of mutual care." People get involved, they serve, and they wash each other's feet. This is the model of Church that BECs promote—at the local, parish, and diocesan level. As people are renewed in this vision, they will also renew parish community life.[10]

Implementing this vision will not happen automatically. It demands dedication and work. It requires focused pastoral planning (a theme emphasized in our mission symposium); it needs a "shared vision" among BEC members. There is no magic formula to bring this about; it needs commitment. As we sang so frequently this past year while preparing for the Fourth World Meeting of Families held in Manila, it takes "self-sacrificing love." Yes, "Only Selfless Love" will build authentic BEC faith-communities.

4. Communities of Salt and Light. During our intermission, students from the John XXIII Catechetical Center led us in song and dance, using the popular liturgical melody: "Salt and Light." It is most appropriate to employ that image to describe BECs. They are to be *communities-in-mission*,[11] communities of salt and light.[12] This vision should shape BEC formation, so that members are truly salt and light (cf. Matt 5:13-16)—to one another, to the wider parish, to members of other churches and religions, to the world at large. This means that issues of justice and peace, interreligious dialogue, transformation of culture, peace-building and peace processes, pro-life

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[10]Arthur R. Baranowski, "Small Christian Communities and the Parish," *Church* 5:4 (Winter 1989): 38-40.

[11]Una O'Neill, "Community for Mission," *The Way Supplement* 61 (Spring 1988): 62-75.

[12]United States Catholic Bishops, "Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on Parish Social Mission," *Origins* 23:25 (Dec 1993): 443-48; Wilton Gregory, "Viewing the Church as 'Communio': Three Challenges," *Origins* 33:24 (Nov 2003): 409, 411-13.

advocacy, etc., are integral to living the BEC vision; these—and many more—are all concrete pathways for BECs to become communities of salt and light.

The world today experiences modernity and globalization. Issues of local and international terrorism are constantly present. Poverty and violence are realities confronting many. Our BECs make these experiences of our brothers and sisters their sources of reflection and action; we try to take the viewpoint of the marginalized and unevangelized.[13] Constantly, following the vision of *Gaudium et Spes*, our communities seek to "scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4).

5. Spirit-directed Communities. Our mission conference spoke often of the important role of the Holy Spirit. BECs are creatures, products, communities created and shaped by the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization (RM 21-30). Our BEC ministry is not just a human effort; BECs are Spirit-driven, Spirit-directed communities. The Spirit gives multi-form gifts to the Church; the BECs must allow many gifts, talents, and contributions to flourish. If there is unity from the diversity of gifts, this can be a forceful witness to the world. As I listened today, it is as if I heard a warning: Do not quench the Spirit! Do not over-structure the communities, demanding many certificates and signatures before admission to the sacraments or the performance of services. Over-institutionalization does not come from the Spirit. I am not saying that structures and procedures are not necessary, but we do have to evaluate our communities to discern if we have crossed the line and fallen into a kind of anti-Spirit institutionalization.

Our Church understands herself as a community that needs constant renewal, reform, and conversion, an *ecclesia semper reformanda.*

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[13]Mary Ann Charity B. Durano, "The Pastoral Vision of Francisco Claver and Orlando Quevedo on the Role of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Social Transformation within the Philippine Context" (MA thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 2003).

This adage has proven true in the past; its applicability remains a present, a constant, a permanent feature of Church life. Hopefully, the BECs will experience the Spirit's presence as they seek to renew themselves to meet the ever-changing signs of the times. May the Spirit breathe fire, energy, enthusiasm, and boldness (*parrhesia*) into the BECs here in Mindanao and throughout the entire country. Let us do our part to "fan the flame of God's gift" (II Tim 1:6) in the Christian communities we serve. Renewed in the Spirit, our BECs will be manifestations of a local Church that is truly missionary. Let us commit ourselves to live the vision of the BEC as an evangelizing community. Let us not squander the great gift of the BECs. *Veni, Sanctae Spiritus!* Come, Holy Spirit!