



# BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES: A RECEPTION OF VATICAN II ECCLESIOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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*The Vatican II vision of the Church as communion and as people of God that is priestly, prophetic and kingly was used as the ecclesiological framework for describing the nature, mission and ministries of BECs in the Philippines. This framework was first appropriated in Mindanao in the early 1970s and later echoed in various diocesan documents and program orientations all over the Philippines. PCP II affirmed this when it described BECs as expression of the vision of the renewed Church – community of disciples, living in communion and participating in the mission of Christ as a prophetic, priestly and kingly people and as the Church of the Poor. Thus, BECs can be regarded as signs of Philippine reception of Vatican II ecclesiology. The findings of a recent survey showed that Vatican II's vision of the Church had now become a reality in many BECs throughout the Philippines but still remained a dream to be pursued.*

**A**fter Vatican II, Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) sprouted in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In the Philippines, the BECs first emerged in Mindanao in the late 1960s, and later spread to some parts of Visayas and Luzon. They were initially referred to as *Gagmayng Kristohanong Katilingban* or *Munting Sambayanang Kristiano* (Small Christian Communities). These were first introduced by foreign religious missionaries and later promoted by the local clergy. The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) – a tri-annual gathering

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based mostly on the author's doctoral dissertation entitled: *An Ecclesiological Perspective of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines* submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the Gregorian University, Rome, 1995.



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of bishops, clergy, religious and laity representing all the dioceses in Mindanao- promoted the formation of BECs in Mindanao. The MSPC secretariat helped develop the programs and ministries that were adopted by the various dioceses and parishes and which would be implemented in the BECs (Lay leadership program, Christian Formation program, Social action, Community based-health program, Family life, Youth, Tribal Filipinos).

The first wave of BECs that emerged in Mindanao, Visayas and Luzon were formed during the Martial Law period which was imposed by Marcos in 1972. Initially, there was an unhampered growth of BECs from the early 70s to the late 70s. There were dioceses that adopted the formation of BECs as their pastoral thrust (Tagum, Davao, Kidapawan, Cotabato, Ipil, Bacolod, Boac, Isabela, etc.). In many cases, especially in Luzon and Visayas, the BECs were formed through the initiative of parish priests. Some were assisted by external pastoral agents such as Kriska-Basic Ecclesial Communities –Service Office (BEC-SO), Redemptorist Mission Teams (RMT), Basic Christian Community –Community Organizing (BCC-CO), Philippine Lay Mission Program (PLMP), Daughters of Charity (DC) Teams, and many others.

The BECs that emerged tried to live up to the holistic/integral vision promoted by MSPC – witnessing, worshipping, serving communities. Awareness/conscientization seminars were conducted that awakened the members of the BECs to the reality of the situation. In the bible-sharing sessions (*bibliambit*) and bible-service (*Kasanulogan sa Pulong, Panimbabon*) the BECs reflected on their current situation vis-à-vis the Word of God. The drama workshops also highlighted the situation under a repressive dictatorial regime. The liturgies that were celebrated during Advent, Christmas, Lent and Holy Week took into account the people's suffering: poverty, injustice, oppression and violation of human rights. The bible-reflection sessions and the liturgies in many BECs enabled people to talk or speak out about the abuses of the dictatorial regime. Many BECs have also set up livelihood projects, communal farm, community-based health programs and cooperatives. There were BECs that participated in prayer rallies and protest marches to express their stand on various issues (military abuses, injustices, human rights violations, dam project, demolition of houses, etc.).



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All these led to the suspicion that the BECs were being used by revolutionary groups which were struggling against the Marcos regime. In a master's thesis on "Contemporary Religious Radicalism in the Philippines" which he submitted to the National Defense College in the 1979, Major Galileo Kintanar alleged that the religious radicals were building up the BECs as "an infrastructure of political power" that could pose as a threat to national security.<sup>2</sup>

While the accusation of BECs as communist fronts or supporters was generally false, it could not be denied that there were some BECs that found themselves within NPA base areas and they could not maintain an independent stance out of fear. There were also BEC programs/promoters that had their own ideological/political leanings. But majority of BECs and promoters were inspired not by ideology but by their faith and church teachings. The identification of the BECs with the radical Left led to the military harassment of the BECs. Many of the development projects such as cooperatives, communal farms and community based health projects were suppressed on the suspicion that these were being used to support the revolutionary movement. There were chapels that were closed and the people were forbidden to gather for prayer and bible service. Some leaders and members of BECs were arrested and imprisoned. Others were killed.

The military harassment and the suspicion from some bishops and priests consequently led to the weakening of many BECs. Those that continued primarily focused on liturgical activities just to play safe. Yet there were still some BECs that continued the socio-economic projects and to speak out against the dictatorial regime. It was difficult to promote and sustain BECs under a repressive and suspicious environment.

After the fall of the Marcos regime and the restoration of democracy in 1986, it became easier to build BECs and engage in social action. There were BECs in San Fernando, *Bukidnon* that successfully waged a campaign against logging that led to the imposition of a total log ban in the province by President Corazon Aquino in 1989. Other BECs in *Zamboanga* were involved in anti-

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<sup>2</sup> Galileo Kintanar, "Contemporary Religious Radicalism in the Philippines," *National Security Review*, June 1979 (mimeographed copy).



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logging, anti-mining and anti-dam campaigns. Around this period there were BECs in North Cotabato and Negros affected by the armed conflict between government forces and the New People's Army (NPA) guerillas declared zones of peace. There were also some BECs that revived or initiated livelihood projects, cooperatives and sustainable agriculture.

In 1991, the Second Plenary Council was held and the vigorous promotion and formation of BECs all over the Philippines was adopted as a pastoral priority. The plenary council came up with this decree:

Basic Ecclesial Communities under various names and forms  
– BCCs, small Christian communities, covenant communities  
– must be vigorously promoted for the full living of the Christian vocation in both urban and rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

The council directed the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) to

issue an official statement on BECs, on their nature and functions as recognized by the Church, making it clear that they are not simply another organization. This official statement of the CBCP shall be, among others things, for the proper orienting of priests and seminarians. Training for work with BECs shall be made part of seminary formation.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, after the plenary council the second wave of the emergence of BECs took place. As part of the implementation of the PCP II's thrust, many dioceses in Visayas and Luzon started their BEC program while for others it was a matter of renewing their efforts. There has been a phenomenal growth of BECs in these regions since then. In Mindanao where the BECs first emerged, the task was for revitalizing the BECs that have either been weakened due to

<sup>3</sup> Section 3, article 109 *Acts and decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishop' Conference of the Philippines, 1992), 267.

<sup>4</sup> PCP II article 110, 267.



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military harassment or that have stagnated. In almost all the dioceses in the Philippines, BECs can now be found.

Various shapes and forms of BECs have emerged in the country. There are chapel-centered communities. These are communities with 30 to 200 families, mostly in the rural areas and also urban areas in Mindanao that made use of the barrio/barangay chapel structures and organizations. Most of the BEC gathering and activities are held in the chapel which is considered as the social space or center of the community.

There are also BECs which are chapel-centered but subdivided into neighborhood cells and family groupings (8-15 families per grouping). The BEC in the barangay or village is a network of neighborhood cells. The members of each cell gather in the homes during weekdays, while all the cells in a BEC gather in the chapel for their regular assembly and Eucharistic celebration (monthly or bi-monthly).

In the urban centers, there are neighborhood cells or family groupings without a chapel. These are found mostly in big cities. Most, if not all, of the activities are done in the homes of the members of the cells. The gathering of the wider community for assembly and the Eucharist is often done in public places – covered basketball court, side-streets, barangay hall or school-houses. There has been a tendency to regard the neighborhood cell consisting of 8-15 members as the BEC itself rather than a BEC-cell which is part of a wider community.

The 2005 BEC National Assembly was the first CBCP-sponsored assembly. The proposal of the 2002 National Assembly for a CBCP national office was approved by the CBCP. The Episcopal Committee on Basic Ecclesial Communities of the CBCP was finally set up in 2007. The setting up of this committee is an expression of the acceptance and support by the CBCP of the BECs as a pastoral priority. The chairmen of the major episcopal commissions (such as biblical apostolate, social action, liturgy, education and catechetics, family and life, youth, laity, and canon law) are members of the BEC committee. This expresses the view that all these commissions can contribute to the growth of BECs and that these areas are constitutive dimensions in the life of the BECs.



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After laying down a brief historical overview of the emergence and development of BECs in the Philippines for over 40 years, the question is what has influenced their growth. Some authors point to the Latin American Church and liberation theology as the inspiration. This is inaccurate. The growth of BECs in the Philippines as well as in Latin America and elsewhere is the fruit of renewal started by Vatican II. It is part of the reception of the council's ecclesiology. The statement of the CBCP-sponsored BEC national assembly in 2005 recognizes the inspiration of Vatican II:

The birth and growth of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in the Philippines has opened the forty years (40) of the Second Vatican Council's efforts to share humanity's joys and hopes, pains and anxieties. Inspired by the Council Fathers' call for *Aggiornamento*, BECs mushroomed in different parts of the country, seeking to make the Universal Church truly local, veering away from a Church popularly conceived as a physical or hierarchical structure, to one that is incarnated in the concrete life – settings of grassroots communities. BECs could not but thank Vatican II's grace of inner renewal. They are indeed children of the Spirit's workings of rebirth in our land.<sup>5</sup>

## **THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF VATICAN II**

Vatican II was primarily an ecclesiological council. The vision of the Church in Vatican II is found mainly in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of Church in the Modern World, provides us with a vision of the Church's relationship with the contemporary world and her responsibility vis-a-vis culture, politics, economics and other fields of secular life. There are two dominant ecclesiological themes in *Lumen Gentium*: (1) the Church as Communion and (2) the Church as People of God that is by nature and mission priestly, prophetic and kingly. In his commentary on *Lumen Gentium*, Wojtyła asserts that both are intimately connected:

<sup>5</sup> Statement of the 2005 CBCP-BEC Assembly. <http://www.cbcpbec.com>



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The council devotes much attention to making the faithful conscious of communion as the link binding together the community of the people of God. Thus, it appears that internal development and renewal of the Church in the Spirit of Vatican II depends to a great extent on the authentic deepening of faith in the Church as community whose essential bond is that of communion.<sup>6</sup> and how the two dominant ecclesiological themes are developed.

The first chapter opens with the affirmation of the Church as mystery, a reality imbued with God's presence – the presence of the Divine Trinity. It traces the Trinitarian origin of the Church and describes the role of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the emergence of the Church. (LG, # 2-6). In this chapter, the model of the Church as communion makes its first appearance. The Church is the sacrament of communion – the union of humanity with God and with one another. The Church is “communion of life, love and truth” (LG, # 9), the “community of faith, hope and love.” (LG, # 8). The communitarian and interpersonal dimension of the Church is given emphasis. The basis of ecclesial communion is the Trinitarian communion: “the church is made one by the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (LG, # 6).

The second chapter focuses on the vision of the Church as People of God. This is based on the New Testament image of the Church as the People of God in the new covenant. All the baptized, whether the lay faithful or the clergy, form one people of God. All share in Christ's and the Church's mission as priest, prophet and king. Thus, the people of God are by its nature and mission a priestly, prophetic and kingly people.

There is a link between the image of the Church and the *triplex munus* (the three-fold office) of Christ. Since Christ is priest, prophet and king and shares his priestly, prophetic and kingly mission with the Church, then the Church is a priestly, prophetic and kingly people. Christ continues his three-fold mission in and through the Church. The Church is a priestly people in so far as its members offer spiritual sacrifices and actively participate in the liturgical and sacramental

<sup>6</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Sources of Renewal: The implementation of the Second Vatican Council* trans. P.S. Falla (London: Collins, 1980), 144.



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celebration. The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the priesthood of the people of God, they lead and enable the lay faithful to actualize their priestly role. This corresponds to the Sacramental model of the Church.

The Church is a prophetic people in so far as it is gathered by the Word and proclaims the Word. This corresponds to the Herald model. The Church is kingly in so far as it overcomes sin, serves Christ in others and works for the kingdom. This corresponds to the Servant model.

The third chapter reflects the Institutional model of the Church. However, it emphasizes that the hierarchy is located within the people of God and is at the service of the people of God. The *triplex munus* is applied to the hierarchical ministry.

Bishops share in Christ's and the Church's prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry. Bishops have the responsibility to teach and proclaim the Word of God. The *magisterium* is an expression of the prophetic ministry. They are called to sanctify the people of God. They are called to govern the flock. Authority must be exercised in the spirit of service not domination. This three-fold episcopal ministry is echoed in another document on the bishops, *Christus Dominus*.

The ministry of priests also follows this three-fold schema. What is significant is that the presbyteral ministry is not defined exclusively in cultic terms. It is prophetic (preaching the Word), priestly (celebrating the divine worship), and kingly or pastoral (shepherding God's people). Another document on the priestly ministry, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, echoes this three-fold schema. Priests are ministers of God's Word, ministers of the Sacraments and the Eucharist, and Pastors of God's people.

The ministry of deacons is also grounded on this three-fold schema. They are in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel, and of the works of charity.

Chapter Four clarifies the role of the laity within the Church. The laity by virtue of their baptism and confirmation are members of the Church and actively participate in Christ's and the Church's priestly, prophetic and kingly mission. Their participation in the mission of the Church is not a privilege given to them by the hierarchy. It is a right and duty by virtue of their baptism and membership in the Church. The laity exercise their priestly office by actively







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participating in the liturgical and sacramental celebration, by offering spiritual sacrifices, and by consecrating their labors. The laity exercise their prophetic office by being heralds of the Gospel, in participating in the work of evangelization and catechesis.

The lay faithful exercise their kingly office by overcoming sin within themselves, serving Christ in others, remedying sinful situations and structures, working to build up the kingdom of God on earth – a kingdom of life and love, of justice and peace.

We find in the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II the integration of the various models of the Church. The Church is community and communion (communion model), the Church is the people of God actively participating in Christ's mission as priestly (sacramental model), prophetic (herald model) and kingly (servant model) people. The people of God is led and served by the hierarchy (institutional model).

Thus, the dominant institutional/sacramental model that dominated before the council has been broadened by a more holistic vision of the Church. The Church is not just an institution, it is also a community whose members are in communion with God and with one another. It is not just a worshipping community, it is also a prophetic and servant community. Its mission is not only spiritual, it is also temporal. The Church is not only concerned about heaven, it is also concerned about the earth and all its problems.

## **POST-VATICAN II RECEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN BECs IN THE PHILIPPINES**

In the Philippines, the first ecclesial body that adopted the Vatican II ecclesiological vision was the first Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) held in 1971. The theme of the conference was: The Church in Mindanao-Sulu – *Worshipping, Teaching and Serving Community*. This vision was first applied to the local Churches in Southern Philippines.

With the emergence of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) - which were then referred to as Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) — this vision of the Church was appropriated for these communities.



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Karl Gaspar, the then executive-secretary of MSPC secretariat, affirms the influence of Vatican II ecclesiology on the vision of the Mindanao-Sulu Church and the Basic Christian Communities:

With the Church being understood as People of God, sharing in Christ's prophetic, priestly and kingly offices, there developed a new consciousness of what constitutes conversion and membership in the Church. This thrust was very clear at MSPC I where the sub-themes dealt with the worshipping, teaching and serving community following Christ's office ... It is through the basic Christian communities that this thrust can be greatly realized.<sup>7</sup>

In the Diocese of Tagum, where the earliest BECs emerged, we find the vision of the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people applied to these communities:<sup>8</sup>

"The Christian Community is a *prophetic, celebrating and serving community*. These characteristics follow the sense of "being together." Therefore each BCC has three sets of ministries corresponding to the three characteristics of the Christian Community.

(1) **Prophetic Ministries.** The Christian Community is prophetic when members collectively meditate on the Word of God and apply it to their lives. Prayer, reflection and discernment are necessary for witnessing. In the BCC the leader of this set of ministries is the Formator who is in charge both of the leaders and of the members. He is assisted by the catechists, the Pre-Cana lecturers, the Family Life lecturers, the Bible-Sharing facilitators.

(2) **The Priestly Ministries.** The Christian Community is priestly when, to inspire, strengthen and deepen the witnessing, the community celebrates its life and its "being together." This type of ministry is headed by the *kaabag* or lay cooperators. He is in charge of conducting the Sunday Services, preaching,

<sup>7</sup> Karl Gaspar, "The Growth and Development of MSPC" *Philippine Priests' Forum* 11/4 (December 1979), 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Ruben Birondo, "Basic Christian Communities: The Experience of the Philippines" *The Clergy Review* 70/7 (July 1985), 25.



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distribution of communion, taking communion to the sick, and blessing people and things. Other ministries under him are the Prayer Leaders, Lectors, Song leaders, Musicians and Altar Boys.

(3) ***The Kingly Ministries.*** The Christian Community is kingly when the community becomes alive and alert due to the witnessing and celebration of the faith. Services follow from this sense of being alive. At the head of this type of ministry is the President whose role it is to coordinate and guide the wisdom and talents in the direction of service.... Also under this type of ministry fall the ministries of different community services such as health, nutrition, social action, cooperatives, documentation and so on.

The influence of Vatican II and MSPC I can be detected in the account of the early efforts to build BECs in the Archdiocese of Cotabato in 1972:

Each barrio convened a chapel assembly to make the people aware of the importance of one's involvement and participation in establishing a real Christian Community. The objective of trying to develop in each barrio a *worshipping, serving, and witnessing* Christian Community was outlined to the people and discussed in open guided dialogues.<sup>9</sup>

The Archdiocese of Davao in 1976 officially adopted the ecclesiological trilogy in its vision of the Small Christian Communities:<sup>10</sup>

“By virtue of the baptism and confirmation received by all the members, the small Christian communities are called and sent in the name of Jesus Christ as prophets, servants and priests.”

***Prophets.*** The small Christian community is sent to proclaim the Good News of Salvation to all people and the vocation of all Christians in the Plan of God. It witnesses its faith in Jesus

<sup>9</sup> “Archdiocese of Cotabato: Lay Liturgical Leadership Program” *MSPC Newsletter* (April-June 1990), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Archdiocese of Davao, *A Vision on Building Small Christian Communities* (Davao City: John XXIII Catechetical Center, 1977) 10.



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Christ in announcing the Christian message and living the Christian values within and without. It is a teaching community nourished by faith.

**Servants.** The small Christian community is committed to total human development. It is committed to the welfare of the people, to the promotion of peace, justice, human dignity and human rights. It is a serving community motivated by charity.

**Priests.** The small Christian community prepares and participates in the celebration of the sacraments thus becoming an image and a sign of the Family of God already gathered and fulfilled. It expresses its hope and joy of expectation in the fullness of God's kingdom through union with Jesus Christ in prayer and worship to the Father. It is a worshipping community because it is a community of hope. The small Christian community is then the sign and sacrament of God's kingdom.

In the prelate of Isabela (Basilan), the *triplex munus* was not only applied to the BECs but to the functions and ministries of the leaders of these communities as well:

According to their gifts and considering that ministries develop according to the felt-needs of the community, leaders will function in any ministry arising from the three-fold mission of the Christian Community (*worshipping, teaching, service*): whatever their ministry, they are open to becoming agents of change.<sup>11</sup>

It was not only in Mindanao that the Vatican II vision of the Church as people of God was received and applied to BECs. There were dioceses in Visayas and Luzon that also did this. This was enshrined in the vision of the archdiocese of Cebu:

BEC is a ministry in the Archdiocese of Cebu which aims for the renewal of the local Church in the light of Vatican II. The vision of the Archdiocese of Cebu looks forward to the renewal of the local Church as a firmly believing, generously *serving*, sincerely *worshipping, prophetically witnessing*, and joyfully radiating community of persons inspired by the Gospel message as interpreted by the magisterium of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "BCC Program of Isabela, Basilan" *MSPC Newsletter* (July-September 1991),

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Archdiocese of Cebu BEC Secretariat "Cebu BEC Handbook" [unpublished document] Cebu City: 1985, 6. 11.





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In the diocese of Bacolod the following vision of the BCC was adopted during the Pastoral Congress of Priests in 1985:<sup>13</sup>

We envision a BCC which is a faith community whose components/elements revolve around the fulfillment of the three-fold function of Christ:

***Worshipping***—where the centrality of the Word and Eucharist is highlighted in communitarian liturgical celebrations, flowing from a spirituality patterned after that of Christ and Mary.

***Teaching***—where there is a reflection on the concrete situation vis-à-vis Gospel values, education program and seminars, continuing formation.

***Serving***—where sharing, livelihood projects, community organizing and mobilization have their proper place.

The ecclesiological trilogy was also the framework adopted by the prelature of Infanta:

In the course of their evaluation, the participants of the pastoral conferences realized that the prelature had in fact progressed through the three phases of the Church's evangelizing mission: the prophetic, the kingly and the priestly. .. The Church of Infanta had in fact been exercising the three-fold mission and the charisma corresponding to them through twenty-six years. Guided by this insight and reflection, the Pastoral Conference decided to integrate the three previous thrust of the prelature's pastoral program, i.e. catechetics, social action, and liturgy into one program, which they identified as the building up of Basic Christian Communities. The threefold mission of the evangelizing Church, i.e. prophetic, kingly and priestly, was henceforth to be fulfilled by the building up of Christian Communities, the *Sambayanang Kristiano*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Proceedings of the Pastoral Congress for Priests, Diocese of Bacolod. November 11-15, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Marcelino Prudente, "Yapak ng Panginoon of the Prelature of Infanta" *Life Forum* 14/4 (1982): 21.



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This was also the case in the diocese of Lucena:

A Pastoral Plan which hewed closely to the pastoral plan of the diocese of Lucena emerged from the general assembly. The main thrust of the plan was the establishment of the Basic Ecclesial Communities or *Munting Sambayanang Kristiano* (MSK). The building of MSKs is a thrust of the whole diocese of Lucena. This pastoral imperative brings into sharp focus the vision of the Church which must be felt in the smallest cells in the Church structure. According to the diocesan vision,

“The MSK is a community which is part of the bigger community of the parish which has the capacity to carry out the role of the Christian as prophet, priest and pastor which Christ shares with all baptized and which has full communion with the parish in its entirety.” This community acts, prays, worships and lives the Word of God. Here the members of the community care, help, feel for each other in the manner of Christ, as expressed in the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>



In the Archdiocese of Manila, the *triplex munus* has also been used to describe the BECs in urban areas such as Project 4, Quezon City:

Little by little, the participants were introduced to the concept of the BCC program by the BCC formation team. On the spiritual plane, the themes developed focused on the Christian Community as a family of God on the threefold functions of Christ, namely as prophet, as priest and as king... The structures aimed at shaping us into a truly Christian Community that fulfill these roles – an evangelizing (*namamahayag*), praying (*nananalangin*) and serving (*naninilbihan*) community.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Rosemarie Cabrera, “Building and Organizing Christian Communities: Cathedral of St. Ferdinand, Lucena City” *Parish Power* 2/34 (August 2, 1992), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Charlito Ayco, “The BCC Experience of Project 4, Quezon City” *Church of the People*, ed. Gabino Mendoza (Manila: Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference for Human Development, 1988), 151-152.





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The BCC-CO program which promoted the formation of BECs all over the country also used this framework. This appears in the program-orientation in 1983:<sup>17</sup>

The thrust of the program is holistic, which means the integration of the threefold mission of the Church: the kingly, the prophetic and the priestly mission...

The **kingly mission** means that the BCC-CO program is service in nature, which in the actual realization of the program means:

- assisting people in organizing themselves towards genuine and effective liberation of all oppression,
- creating leadership roles, structures and tasks that will be run in a democratic way (with full participation of all).

The **prophetic mission** means a critical attitude of witnessing in line with the Judaeo-Christian values vis-a-vis the historical context of the present time implies;

- formation of the basic Christian values of justice, love, peace, truth, liberation and an outlook that will enable the people to interpret the signs of the times correctly
- education of members and leaders with cognitive and effective skills for community inter-action and education
- community oriented activities such as labor unions, health programs, agricultural undertakings for more and better food for all.

The **priestly mission** means promoting contemporary worship by:

- unselfish giving of self in living out in day to day life the convictions of and the commitment to a liberating Christianity,
- sharing with others those convictions, commitments and life-experiences in liturgical gatherings fitted for the particular community,
- getting deeper insights into the response and practice of worship and prayer on personal and communal levels through prayerful reflections, seminars, consultations with other similar groups and communities.

<sup>17</sup> *BCC-CO Program Orientation* (Quezon City: BCC-CO Inter-regional Secretariat, 1983), 34-35.



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The KRISKA/BEC program used the “Manual for Formation of BCC Leaders” developed by Fr. Manny Gabriel and Emmanuel de Guzman of the Lay Formation Institute. This manual adopts the ecclesiological trilogy:<sup>18</sup> Fr. Manuel Gabriel and Emmanuel de Guzman,

### **TOWARDS CHURCH RENEWAL AND SPIRITUALITY IN BCC: A MANUAL FOR THE INITIAL FORMATION OF BCC LEADERS**

**(Manila: Lay Formation Institute, 1985), 113-114.**

By virtue of baptism, every Christian receives a concrete charism or gift from the Spirit to fulfill the threefold mission of the Church, viz., kingly, prophetic and priestly... In the development of BCCs, the following have been recognized as important lay ministries:

The **kingly charisms** of Christians are enhanced in BCC through organization and services. Organization-wise each BCC unit is neither too small nor too big, in order to generate interpersonal relationship and involvement among the members, as they assume various roles and functions in the community. Services in terms of projects and programs are gleaned from and geared towards the social problems and needs of the community. The development of the kingly ministries enables the people to be self-propelling and serving community.

The **prophetic charisms** of the communities are identified and promoted through the continuing education and formation. The members are trained and harnessed to assume the basic responsibility to know God’s Word in the light of their existential realities. This can take the form of prayer meetings, conscientization programs, adult catechesis, leadership and membership seminars. Education and formation in this context will depend on the communities’ level of awareness and need-situations.

<sup>18</sup> Fr. Manuel Gabriel and Emmanuel de Guzman, *Towards Church Renewal and Spirituality in BCC: a Manual for the Initial Formation of BCC Leaders* (Manila: Lay Formation Institute, 1985), 113-114.







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The development of the **priestly charism** of the laity is crucial in the theology of BCC. It takes the prevailing interests in BCC to refocus the need to promote anew the priesthood of the laity and their concomitant ministries for worship and prayer ... thereby promoting communities that are self-nourishing and celebrating.

We can therefore say that prior to PCP II, the Vatican II ecclesiological trilogy has been used by many dioceses and parishes all over the country and by most of the programs and institutions promoting the formation of BECs - the MSPC, BCC-CO, LFI, KRISKA/BEC, RMT, etc. This ecclesiological framework has been used to describe the nature, mission, structure, activities, charisms and ministries within the BECs. The BECs are priestly, prophetic, servant communities. They participate in the priestly-prophetic-kingly mission of Christ. The structures and activities of the BECs may be classified within this framework: (1) bible-reflection, seminars, catechetics would fall under prophetic; (2) liturgical and para-liturgical activities under priestly, (3) socio-economic projects, mobilization for justice, peace and integrity of creation are under kingly.

Examining these various statements and documents, what is significant is that the process of reception has been accompanied by a more concrete, contextual and even radical understanding of what it means for BECs to be a priestly, prophetic and kingly people. This is especially evident in the understanding of the kingly mission. Traditionally, the kingly office was associated with the governing function – the *munus regendi*. Although this understanding still prevails in the Vatican II documents especially in the context of the ordained ministry, the documents and texts emerging from the Philippines adopted the understanding found in the section on the laity in *Lumen Gentium* (# 36) which associates the kingly office with service and social action. Thus, participation in the kingly mission for BECs means to be a servant community. This can be expressed in various ways: acts of charity; mutual-aid system, engagement in socio-economic projects that respond to the needs of the people; working for justice and the defense of human rights; peace advocacy; care for the earth and the integrity of creation, etc. All these are regarded as part of the efforts to work for the realization of the kingdom of God in our midst.



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The understanding of the prophetic mission of the BECs is associated with the proclamation of the Gospel or the announcing of the Good News (evangelization), catechesis, witnessing and teaching/education. There is also emphasis on “formation of the basic Christian values of justice, love, peace, truth, liberation and an outlook that will enable the people to interpret the signs of the times correctly.”<sup>19</sup> However, in these documents, there seems to be no explicit mention of the prophetic role of denunciation of the injustices, oppression, violence, corruption, violation of human rights and the destruction of the environment. However, there is reference to “conscientization,” and “a critical attitude of witnessing in line with the Judaeo-Christian values vis-a-vis the historical context now.” Philip Emmanuel Penaflor describes the conscientization process in the BECs:

In terms of the conscientization process of the BEC members, this is being done through BEC seminars where the members understand their being Church and its implication in their daily life. The BEC seminars also include social analysis wherein the members come to know their present situation as well as the dynamics which bring about a situation. The conscientization process is sustained by on-going formation program through weekly meetings of the BEC cells.<sup>20</sup>

What fosters a prophetic-critical attitude is the methodology used in many of the bible-reflection sessions where the Word of God is read in the context of their concrete situation (e.g. poverty, oppression, human rights violation, destruction of the environment). The situation is also judged in the light of the Word. This method enables the members of the BECs to share and talk about the problems they face. It breaks the culture of silence and can move them to liberating action. Robinson Montalba sums up what it means for BECs to be prophetic communities:

<sup>19</sup> Cf. BCC-CO program orientation.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Emmanuel Penaflor, *An Exploratory Study on Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as Paradigm for Social Transformation: Kaingin II Experience* (A Thesis presented to the Faculty of Sociology, Asian Social Institute, 1992), 271.



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The Basic Christian Communities must be truly prophetic – meaning that they are animated by the Word of God and guided by the Spirit of Jesus; they announce the kingdom and the liberating presence of Jesus Christ in all the signs of love that exists among people in all the authentic gestures of solidarity; they denounce, by words and deeds, all the attitude of egoism and injustice, hatred and oppression at personal and institutional levels that destroy the person and human coexistence; they call to conversion all those who, through their sins, bring about personal and social injury, in order to establish the relationship of justice and brotherhood among all people.<sup>21</sup>

The priestly nature of BECs is associated mainly with active participation in liturgical celebration. This is concretely expressed through the following: (1) the regular Sunday bible-service led by lay liturgical leaders; (2) the monthly or bi-monthly celebration of the Eucharist (3) para-liturgical services (e.g. novena, biblical rosary, rituals for planting and harvesting), (4) celebration of the liturgical seasons (5) liturgies before, during and after mobilization for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, (6) liturgy for BEC “martyrs” (7) fiesta celebration. The moral-existential-spiritual dimension of the priestly office is not sufficiently emphasized in these documents although in one of these there is a mention about “unselfish giving of self in living out in day to day life the convictions of and the commitment to a liberating Christianity.”<sup>22</sup>

All in all, using the Vatican II ecclesiological framework provides a holistic vision of these communities. The priestly, prophetic and kingly missions are constitutive dimensions of the BEC’s way of life. BECs are not just bible-sharing groups. Neither are they only liturgical assemblies. Nor are they only socio-economic or political organizations. The BECs are not one-dimensional communities. The ongoing task of BECs is to develop and integrate these three dimensions and grow as priestly-prophetic- servant communities.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson Montalba, *Evangelization and Liberation of the Poor: Theology and Praxis* [Doctoral Dissertation] (Rome, Angelicum, 1987), 225.

<sup>22</sup> BCC-CO Program orientation.



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The three-fold mission is always lived in the context of community and communion. Thus, the ecclesiology of communion is intimately linked with active participation as people of God in the priestly-prophetic-kingly mission - communion in a state of mission. The ecclesiology of participatory church/community is linked with the three-fold mission.

Prior to PCP II, the vision of the Church as communion was seldom explicitly mentioned in most of the BEC documents. This was rather implied in so far as the *Triplex Munus* is seen in a communitarian context. Bishop Teodoro Bacani pointed to the various levels of realization of the Church as communion in the Christian family, BECs, parish, diocese and universal Church:

On the second level of realization of the church are the basic ecclesial communities or basic Christian communities (BECs or BCCs). A basic ecclesial community is a communion of families who are united to each other not only by local proximity but more important by spiritual bonds (the word of God, the Eucharist, prayer, mutual help and service, common celebration, etc.)...

On the third level is the parish which is a communion of basic ecclesial communities.<sup>23</sup>

Bishop Francisco Claver likewise wrote about BECs as expression of ecclesial communion:

Over the years there has been a growing realization that the communion of Churches that obtains at the regional levels is that self-same kind of communion that has been building at lower levels – diocesan, vicarial and parochial, all the way down to the *capilla* – between bishops, priests, religious, church workers and leaders, and the laity in general. Communion and community of the same are pivotal ideas in the BCC process of development.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bishop Teodoro Bacani, “*Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kami Ngayon?*” (A Simple Presentation on the Church) *Church of the People*, ed., Gabino Mendoza (Manila: Bishops-Businessmen Conference for Human Development, 1988), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop Francisco Claver, “The History of the BCCs: Philippines”, *Church of the People*, ed., Gabino Mendoza (Manila: Bishops-Businessmen Conference for Human Development, 1988), 22-23.



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Bacani and Claver affirm that the BECs are one of the levels where communion may be experienced within the local Church. These are part of the diocesan and parochial structure of communion. The parish is thus envisioned as a communion of communions – a network of BECs.

## **PCP II VISION OF A RENEWED CHURCH AND ITS EXPRESSION IN BECs**

PCP II vision of a renewed Church is found in the second part of the document entitled “Envisioning a Church Renewed”, and in the third section entitled “Discipleship in Community: the Church.” There is a paragraph (# 137) that sums up the vision of what it means for the Church to be a community of disciples and links its realization with the BECs:

“our vision of the Church as communion, participation and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and a Church of the poor, that is a renewed Church, is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement, that is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities” (PCP II, # 138).

The vision of a renewed Church and the BECs can be paraphrased thus:

The community of disciples  
living in communion  
participating in the mission of Christ  
as a priestly, prophetic and kingly people  
and as the Church of the Poor

The PCP II vision of the Church as communion and the priestly, prophetic and kingly people of God obviously echo the ecclesiology of Vatican II. We can say that PCP II is a contextual reception of Vatican II ecclesiology. It appropriates the Vatican II vision of the



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Church for the Philippine context and explicitly links it to BECs. However, PCP II does not just echo Vatican II, it also develops it further. “Community of Disciples” is a new image. “Church of the poor” is a post-Vatican II development of the seminal idea that we find in *Lumen Gentium* # 8 — the Church following the example of Jesus in poverty.

Like Vatican II, PCP II has a holistic and coherent vision of the Church which embraces the various models of the Church. PCP II further links this ecclesiological vision to BECs. Whatever is said of the Church in general can be applied to the BECs. This is significant since PCP II implies that the vision of the Church in Vatican II can be realized and experienced by ordinary people in the BECs – the local incarnation of the Church in the grassroots.

## **FROM VISION TO REALITY**

The documents and statements cited in this paper record the reception of Vatican II ecclesiology in the BECs in the Philippines. The vision of what BECs are supposed to be has been influenced by the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The question is, how far has this vision been received and experienced as a way of life for the ordinary members of the Church? The Church in the Philippines continues to make Vatican II and PCP II’s vision of a renewed Church a reality in various parishes, villages and neighborhood communities through the building up of BECs which are found in almost all the dioceses. In a survey conducted by the CBCP-BEC Committee in 2013<sup>25</sup>, 92% of the respondent-dioceses have adopted the formation of the BECs as a pastoral priority. According to the survey, BECs are already established in 72% of the parishes nationwide. They did not emerge and develop at the same time. Their growth has not taken place in a uniform manner. Some have been formed forty years ago, while others are just starting. Some are already fully developed and are realizing the vision of a renewed Church while many are still struggling to make it a reality. Many of those that have been

<sup>25</sup> CBCP-BEC Committee, National Diocesan BEC Profile [unpublished survey] September 2013.



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established first are undergoing maintenance mode and maybe stagnating. They need to be revitalized.

Ecclesial communion is experienced among the members of the BECs who experience unity, solidarity and sharing, and among the BECs within the parish thereby making the parish a communion and a network of BECs. In these parishes, the BECs are regarded as integral part of the parish structure and these are represented in the parish pastoral council.

Within the BECs, the lay faithful actively participate in the prophetic and evangelizing mission of the Church. They come together regularly to reflect on the Word of God and live the Word in their day to day life thereby growing as evangelizing and witnessing communities. BECs in 91% of respondent-dioceses have regular weekly gospel sharing.

The members of the BECs actively participate in various liturgical celebrations of the community thereby actualizing their priestly mission. Most of the activities of BECs have regular weekly bible-service or priest-less Sunday Liturgy (77%), monthly or bi-monthly mass (91%), and block-rosary (88%).

The BECs grow as kingly/serving communities as they work together to work for total human development, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Only 40% of the parishes have BEC-based social action program. These are BECs with mutual-aid systems, livelihood projects, sustainable agriculture, participation in good governance, political education, peace advocacy, environmental advocacy, etc.

In general, 75% of the respondent-dioceses classify their BECs as mostly evangelical-liturgical in character (BECs whose activities are limited to gospel sharing, liturgy of the Word and regular masses without social action component). Only 25% of the respondent-dioceses classify their BECs as mostly holistic (BECs that integrate evangelization, liturgy and social action).

Like the kingdom of God, the BECs are “not-yet-but- already” reality. They are already present but many have not yet made the Vatican II’s vision of a renewed Church fully a reality. Some are already genuine vibrant communities of the faithful that live in communion as prophetic, worshipping, and serving communities. However, there are still many who are simply gospel sharing groups



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composed of 8-10 neighbors, mostly women, that gather weekly in their homes in the urban areas. There are also many who are just small groups in the rural areas who gather in the chapels for the priest-less Sunday liturgy led by male liturgical leaders. There are dioceses and parishes where BECs are reduced to small bible-sharing neighborhood groups or liturgical assemblies that are inward-looking. There are some dioceses that lack a thorough program of new evangelization in their BEC formation and adopted the so-called “sanction policy” where active membership in the BECs is a prerequisite for parents who want to have their child baptized. There is a need to emphasize that active membership in BECs is the fruit of renewed evangelization that leads to conversion and a decision to live as genuine disciples of Jesus in community. They still have to experience what it truly means to be genuine communities capable of renewing the Church and transforming society. It takes time before BECs can become a way of life. There is still much to be done for the full reception of Vatican II ecclesiology in the lives of the ordinary lay faithful. The journey towards a renewed Church in the BECs continues.

I wish to sum up my paper with a song that I composed, which is sung by BECs in various parts of the country – it has Cebuano, Waray and Tagalog versions. The song is based on the vision of a renewed Church of Vatican II and PCP II. Below is the Tagalog version.

#### **Sambayanan ng mga Alagad**

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
Nagkakaisa at nakikilahok sa Misyon ni Kristo.  
Bayang mala-pari, propeta at hari,  
Sambayanan ng mga dukha, Iglesyang maralita.

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
Pinagkakaisa't pinagbubuklod ng Panginoon.  
Nagbabahaginan ng salita at Eukaristiya  
At mga ari-arian matalik na kaibigan.







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*Koro:*

Bayang nagpapahayag ng mabuting balita,  
bayang nananalangin at naglilingkod.  
Bayang nagpapahayag ng mabuting balita,  
bayang nananalangin at naglilingkod.

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
Na nakikinig sa Salita ng Dios  
At nagpapahayag sa Magandang Balita  
Ng ating kaligtasan at kaharian ng Dios.

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
Nanalangin at sumasamba sa Panginoon.  
Handa magbubuwis sa ating buhay  
Gaya ni Kristo ang dakilang punong pari. (*koro*)

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
Pamayanang naglilingkod sa Panginoon  
Kumikilos para sa hustisya at kapayapaan  
Nakikibaka at nagpalaganap sa Kaharian.

Tayo ang sambayanan ng mga alagad  
sumasa-anib at pumapanig ng mga mahirap.  
Walang ibang pinanaligan kundi ang Panginoon  
Masigasig na lumalahok sa misyon ni Kristo (*koro*)

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