TWO CURRENTS IN FILIPINO CHRISTIANITY II*

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A SKETCH OF BASIC CHURCH COMMUNITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Filipino Christianity, like any reality rooted and flourishing in history, is as much constituted by its past as it is by the introduction of new currents. Today its basic stratum traces itself to the beginnings of Spanish colonization, and exists in the mode of what has been called "the traditional form of faith." This situation, however, has not remained unchanged. The last decades have witnessed the emergence of a new phenomenon in Filipino Christianity — basic church communities.¹ While the phenomenon is not evenly found in the Catholic Church in the Philippines, its vital presence and steady growth in the more progressive sectors make it a significant factor in the future of Filipino Christianity. It will definitely play a role in the way Filipino Christianity faces its social mission, and therefore deserves attention and study.

The emergence of basic church communities in Filipino Christianity was really part of a global movement in search of viable ways of living together humanly and Christianly. The two major international conferences on new forms of community — one organized by the International Documentation Center (IDOC) in Rome, and the other by Pro Mundi Vita — attest to the global character of the movement. As the documentation from Pro Mundi Vita states,

*The first section of this article appeared in LANDAS 2 (1988) 25-64.

1. "Basic church communities" is used as a general term inclusive of what are called "basic Christian communities" (BCC) or "basic ecclesial communities" (BEC) or some other forms of basic communities associated with Christ and the Church.
Today we are witnesses of an earnest quest for new forms of community life. It is not only a question of the orders and congregations, widely involved as they are in working for the renewal of the traditional structures of the religious life. The concern for community is now also found more and more at the level of lay Christian movements, at the level of the parish itself. For that matter, the phenomenon is not limited to Christian churches. It can also be found in many groups of religious inspiration which refuse to attach themselves to any particular church; it manifests itself even in the wider context of an interest now shared by many people in renewing life in society itself through new relations and structures.²

Thus, what is emerging in the Philippine scene is not an isolated program formulated by a few but really part of a human search for authentic social existence.

In spite of this global dimension, however, there clearly exists a wide variety within this movement for authentic community. Size, scope, and organizational structures vary from community to community. But more significant than these is the fundamental difference between communities in the First World and those in the Third World. The conference paper of IDOC puts it in the following words: "In the Third World the struggle for basic 'survival values' is so intense that it frequently precludes concern for many aspects of the 'being values' which are often the major concern in many communities of the First World."³ A good illustration of this difference is the role of interpersonal relations in both types of communities. In a secular Western setting, interpersonal relationships are an important antidote to urban mobility and anonymity; while in a poor and oppressed situation, the same relationships are valued as a strategic mechanism against destruction and slow death.

This is the broad framework for the discussion of basic church communities in Filipino Christianity. As a new current in mainstream Christianity in the Philippines, it echoes similar attempts in other parts of the world in the quest for human and Christian relations. At the same time, however, it must be viewed vis-a-vis the local situation.

3. IDOC International, no. 44 (March 25, 1972), reprinted in Gresh, New Wineskins, 81.
CONTEXT AND SCHEMA FOR STUDY

Two reasons make it important for any study of basic church communities in the Philippines to begin with their relationship with the hierarchy. First, the earliest basic church communities, while not mandated from above, were mostly organized by persons who were, in fact, members or associates of the lower hierarchy — the parish priest or the religious sister. Second, the influence of clerics on the people plays a considerable, though not necessarily decisive, role in the success or failure of any new phenomenon in Filipino Christianity.

In 1977, at its annual meeting in January, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued a pastoral letter which touched upon basic Christian communities:

The establishment of Basic Christian Communities, whose members are united in one Faith and Hope, and bound together by Love and Service, springs from the mandate of Evangelization. And our lay workers are essential in the implementation of this mission. We thank them and give them our pledge of support.  

On the formal level then, there is an endorsement of basic Christian communities from the highest official body of the Catholic Church in the country. This official word, it would seem, would lead to a unanimous and uniform application of building basic church communities as a pastoral strategy. However, it did not materialize in that way. Individual church leaders were either complacent with regard to these communities or even opposed them as subversive. One found then a glaring gap between theory and practice in the stance of the official church with regard to basic Christian communities.

It was in view of this gap that the Inter-BCC Dialogue held in 1980 saw the dissemination of its proceedings as "geared towards informing and orienting the Church hierarchy, especially the bishops, on the actual experiences of the BCCs and towards foster-

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ing pastoral relationships among the bishops, priests/religious and lay people.

The most significant documentation of this gap consists in the results of a survey on pastoral priorities commissioned by the CBCP in 1984. Bishops from the three regions (Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao) were sent questionnaires. When asked about their priorities for pastoral programs, they ranked the ministry involving BCC very high — higher than they did five years ago. However, there is a considerable gap between what actually exists and what is planned for the future, especially in Luzon.

As the report states, "the most dramatic change in present outlooks and future plans is among the dioceses of Luzon with a .78 index of variation between present and future tendencies, followed by those of the Visayas with .43, and lastly by those of Mindanao with a low .06." Suggesting that "differing regional politico-economic conditions have very much to do with how the Bishops perceive things in general and choose work priorities for their dioceses," the report confirms, nevertheless, the still existing gap between pronouncement and practice regarding basic church communities.

The above notwithstanding, basic church communities continue to grow in different areas in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao. Late November 1978 already saw a national consultation on the formation of basic Christian communities through the application of principles of community organizing (CO), a methodology known as the BCC-CO. A consultation called "Inter-BCC Dialogue: A Philippine Experience" was held two years after. These consultations among others clearly show how much intensive spadework has taken place at the grassroots level.

Diversity and creativity have characterized the emergence of the basic church communities in the local scene. A wide variety of models and strategies exists, and a growing need for an exchange among these different models has been felt. The Inter-BCC Dialogue saw this as one of its primary objectives: "To enable BCC organizers and practitioners, through dialogue, to see and appre-

7. Ibid. 38.
ciate the unique contributions of each approach and model, thereby broadening their own perspectives and identifying commonalities." In fact, this consultation involved different groups engaged in organizing basic church communities, from the Ecclesial Commission on the Lay Apostolate (ECLA) to BCC-CO.

Given such a context, the present paper cannot hope to give a full account of the state of basic church communities in the Philippines. To try to do so would invalidate the very necessity for the various meetings on the national or local level. What is to be undertaken here is more modest but, hopefully, still worthwhile.

In spite of the vitality that one finds in existing basic Christian communities, there has been little effort at putting this rich experience within a theological framework. As a result, the precious nuances of the experience have not been able to surface, and are thus not seen in the light of the social mission of the Church. It is along this line that this essay sees its service.

Concretely, the data to be used with regard to the experience of local basic church communities come from published and unpublished, especially mimeographed, documentation. The results of the BCC-CO National Consultation and the Inter-BCC Dialogue, among others, have proved helpful. These data will be discussed under the following headings: the nature of basic church communities, the dynamics involved in building them, and their social implications.

THEOLOGICAL WORD-CLUSTERS: THE NATURE OF BASIC CHURCH COMMUNITIES

Perhaps it is characteristic of any new phenomenon to resist definition. Specialist or not, everybody refuses to give a definition, fearing that it may turn out to be the death-kiss to such a vibrant reality. The phenomenon of basic Christian communities appears to be suffering this fate.

In both the international conferences of IDOC and Pro Mundi Vita, no clear-cut definition of basic church communities was given. The Pro Mundi Vita paper explains why this absence of a definition:

8. Gabriel and de Guzman, Inter-BCC Dialogue, ii.
It was not only impossible to contain in a single concept such a disparate phenomenon, but it was also feared that it would prove detrimental to the living reality to try to enclose it within a theoretical definition. Furthermore, no agreement could be reached on the question of what discipline of thought should be applied to the definition sought.  

IDOC, on the other hand, did not give a definition but merely a typology which enumerated different forms of these communities.

Another typology is suggested by the CBCP’s 1984 survey on pastoral priorities. Distinguishing basic church community from “traditional parish organizations,” and “traditional apostolates” which are “all geared primarily toward private spirituality,” the survey report presents the following types and their corresponding emphases:

1) The BCC seen principally as a liturgical community; lay ministers and their service to the community; the formation of a spirituality of communal prayer.
2) The BCC as above in [1], but with an opening to the broader development concerns of the secular community; the formation of a spirituality of service to people.
3) The BCC as in [2], but with an acceptance of its prophetic role in society in regard not only to personal morality and spirituality but also to social.
4) The BCC as in [3], but organized as well for prophetic action and involvement in its apostolates and formation programs.

The report further comments that more than in Luzon and Visayas, “the Mindanao dioceses define BCCs as prophetic communities and are moving slightly in the direction of BCCs of prophetic action.”

Useful though such typologies are, they do not offer a definition of basic church communities. The reluctance to confine an emerging movement into the strait jacket of a definition is a point well taken. However, there is still considerable value in, at least, pointing to the nature of basic church communities in order to

9. Pro Mundi Vita, in Gresh, New Wineskins, 10.
10. IDOC International, in Gresh, New Wineskins, 80-81.
12. Ibid. 37.
separate the essential from the insignificant in the phenomenon. This the paper will undertake by discussing the theological language commonly associated with the nature of basic Christian communities.

1. ‘Christian’: Self-Evident yet Polyvalent

Basic church communities should be, in theory and in practice, Christian. That this should be so is self-evident. But as one goes through church teaching as well as documentation on basic church communities, one finds a great amount of richness in the way this particular quality is understood.

Church teaching on basic church communities has emphasized, especially of late, the Christian, particularly the ecclesiological, character of these communities. This is indicated by the use among church circles of ‘basic ecclesial communities’ (BEC) rather than BCC, the shift in terminology intended to dispel the possibility of having a Christian community severed from the Church. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi, clearly distinguishes what he refers to as ecclesial communities:

The difference is already notable: the communities which by their spirit of opposition cut themselves off from the Church, and whose unity they wound, can well be called communautés de base, but in this case it is a strictly sociological name. They could not, without a misuse of terms, be called ecclesial communautés de base, even if, while being hostile to the hierarchy, they claim to remain within the unity of the Church. This name belongs to the other groups, those which come together within the Church in order to unite themselves to the Church and to cause the Church to grow. 13

Aside from this insistence on union with the Church, the document continues to enumerate other elements related to the ecclesial character of these communities, namely, the Word of God as its primary nourishment, and a missionary consciousness. However, the most significant word — and therefore, reality — associated by Pope Paul VI with basic Christian communities is evangelization.

He describes this association of basic Christian communities to evangelization in the following way: "as hearers of the Gospel, which is proclaimed to them and privileged beneficiaries of evangelization, they will soon become proclaimers of the Gospel themselves." Basic Christian communities then become the venue for evangelization, and what makes them distinctly Christian is the presence of the Gospel in their midst.

The message of Evangelii Nuntiandi on basic church communities is echoed by the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. In its concluding paper, it describes the Christian dimension of basic communities thus:

A basic community becomes a Christian community when its inspiration, model and center is Jesus, the Risen Lord. There is openness to the charisms of the Holy Spirit, a praying and a worshipping together. The members of the community share the Word of God, integrate it into their daily lives and proclaim it to others.

Here one finds the same elements in basic Christian communities stressed by both Pope Paul VI and the Asian Bishops — the centrality of God's Word, and an awareness of mission.

The Asian Colloquium, however, pushes the discussion on the Christian character of basic communities further. While acknowledging the role of these communities in evangelization, it clearly states that these basic church communities are a valid context for ministries:

It must be said that these small communities operating at a still lower level than the parish, allowing for even deeper human and Christian relationships, are the most fundamental ecclesial realities, provided they too are equipped with proportionate services and ministries, including the priestly ministry. This amounts to saying that, while these communities need to be linked to the ministry of the bishop, they nevertheless embody the mystery of the church in their own right; they are in a true sense "local Churches."

14. Ibid. 543.
16. Ibid. 32.
The implications of this statement are such that basic church communities are no longer considered simply as antidotes against impersonality in the Church. They can be said to be capable of providing Christians with as vital an existence as they need. And it is because of this that they can be seen as a context for the different ministries in the Church.

Thus, on the level of the official teaching of the Church, the distinctly Christian character of basic church communities is closely related to evangelization and ministry. Of course, there is unanimity on the primacy of Christ and His Word; but this is qualified and concretized in terms of evangelization and ministry. The basic church community is truly a locus for the Word of Christ. It becomes Christian to the extent that it receives and transmits this Word, to the same extent that it is both evangelized and evangelizing. Furthermore, by virtue of its role in evangelization, it presents itself as an authentic context for ministry. Within the basic church community, new forms of ministry can arise to meet changing situations.

Documentation from local basic church communities has also focused on the Christian quality of these communities. In some cases, it has taken over the use of the same words associated with basic church communities in the official teaching. The movement known as "Kriska," meaning "Kristiyanong Kapitbahayan" in Filipino and "Kristohanong Katilingban/Kasilinganan" in Cebuano, declares evangelization as one of its aims, which it describes as "encountering Jesus of the Gospel, sharing experiences of His presence in oneself, in others, in events."17

However, the understanding of the Christian quality of local basic church communities has not been limited to the terms found in official church documents. For instance, many existing basic church communities have expressed their Christian character in relation to the Reign of God. The following would be a typical expression of this:

Upang maitatag ang Kaharian ng Diyos sa mga panahong ito ay kailangang baguhin ang lipunan. Mababago ang lipunan kung maibabalik ang katarungan. Maibabalik ang katarungan kung nalulunasan ang pagka-aba at

pagka-api ng karamihan ng ating kababayan. Para sa pakay na iyan kailangan natin ang Maliliit na Sambayanang Kristiyano.

(There is need to change society in order to build the Reign of God today. Society will be changed if justice is established. Justice will be established if the poverty and oppression of the majority of our people are eradicated. For this purpose we need basic Christian communities.)

Here the basic church community is seen in function of the establishment of the Reign of God, clearly understood in terms of justice. According to some local BCC practitioners, this describes the distinctive Christian feature of these communities. The BCC-CO program, for example, explains this in the following words:

A community bereft of its faith dimension is not a Christian community. Fortunately, the problem of religion especially among the lower strata of Philippine society is not so much the absence of faith in the hearts of the people. However, the expression of this faith derived for the most part from the language of foreign cultures and of times past have tended to divorce their faith from present realities... Thus the quest for the “living and true” God Who is Emmanuel to the outcast, the oppressed and the forgotten becomes a vital component in their search for a fuller unity among these communities.

One finds in this statement a distinction between a faith that alienates people from the everyday realities of their lives, and a faith in God who is incarnate among them. With this a nuance has already occurred in the understanding of what it is that makes basic church communities truly Christian.

However, not all basic church communities in the Philippines have accepted this shift in understanding. This is particularly true of those basic church communities which employ a regular prayer meeting as its central activity.

The foregoing discussion on the Christian character of basic church communities has hopefully given some indication of the wide variety of meanings that it has. There is certain agreement that these communities should bear the name of Christ. However, different words are associated with this Christian character; among

18. “Kriska, Maliliit na Sambayanang Kristiyano, Kaharian ng Diyos,” 2. (Mimeographed.)
19. Timoteo G. Butalid, “Scaps CO Approach to Christian Community Building,” 5, found in “Selected Readings on BCC-CO.” (Mimeographed.)
them are evangelization, ministry, and the Reign of God. These word-differences do not necessarily mean a diametrically opposed understanding of basic church communities. They simply show the various nuances present in expressing the religious nature of these communities.

2. 'Basic Community': A Child of Theology and Sociology

If the word 'Christian' is polyvalent in meaning, 'basic community' appears like an unknown in a quadratic equation. Aside from the inherent difficulty in defining a new phenomenon like basic church communities, the term itself involves both theological and sociological underpinnings and thus makes definition more difficult.

This paper proposes a way out of this impasse. Rather than concentrate on the conceptual level, it takes a more viable approach by discussing how the term has been used in both theology and field experience. One can be Wittgensteinian by saying that meaning is use.

Community is an essential aspect of Christianity, and not simply an addition to it. Scriptures clearly bear witness to this truth: faith in Christ entails participation in community. Bernard Cooke, in Christian Community: Response to Reality, summarizes the New Testament data:

For the early Church, a radically new principle of continuity for the community's faith and life had become available: the presence to the community of the risen Christ and his Spirit. It was in their faith-contact with Christ that the individual Christians found their own identity as believers and their Christian identification with one another. Christ himself functioned as the basic principle of community, rather than teaching or structures or ritual.20

Because Christ has become the principle of community, Christianity has continually sought throughout its history to live by this different principle. In this, one can say that the term 'community' for the Christian assumes a properly theological character.

In its quest to live by Christ as the principle of community, Christianity found itself concretizing community in different ways. Even during New Testament times, the structure for community in the Hellenistic churches was not identical with those of the Johannine communities.\textsuperscript{21} It is as a result of this process of concretization that ‘community’ also becomes a sociological reality. From this point of view, one can describe it the way David Clark does: “I, therefore, define community as essentially a sentiment which people have about themselves in relation to others and others in relation to themselves; a sentiment expressed in action and behavior but still basically a feeling.”\textsuperscript{22} He further states that essential to a community are a sense of significance and a sense of solidarity.

A comprehensive sociological discussion of community is found in Fr. Renato A. Ocampo’s 1987 dissertation, “Two Basic Christian Communities: An Exploratory Study.” After presenting different sociological approaches to community, he finds George A. Hillery’s theory of vill most apt, which he describes thus:

The word \textit{vill} is thereby understood to be “a general model which includes both the models of folk village and cities.” The model of the vill is described using an integrating construct and a list of elements. These elements are seen as integrated around three foci: space, cooperation, and family. The integrating construct is, moreover, stated in this manner: “The vill is a localized system integrated by means of families and cooperation.”\textsuperscript{23}

This provides one possible starting point for a better understanding of basic church communities.

With this broad theological and sociological framework, one can now proceed to see how the term “basic community” has, in fact, been used in relation to basic Christian communities.

Local documentation on existing basic church communities has not been explicit regarding their understanding of what a basic community is. Often one arrives at this understanding by implication. For example, in Fr. Manuel Gabriel’s description of his ex-


\textsuperscript{22} David Clark, \textit{Basic Communities: Towards an Alternative Society} (London: SPCK, 1977) 4.

\textsuperscript{23} Renato A. Ocampo, “Two Basic Christian Communities: An Exploratory Study” (Ph.D. dissertation, Xavier University, 1987) 55.
experience in Novaliches, the basic Christian community is understood as a social unit in the parish:

The leaders have zeroed in on re-structuring the Christian communities (sub-parishes) through the concept of basic christian communities (stations, ugnayan, purok, areas, blocks). In the same vein, to avoid closed-systems and ghettos, a situation that basic christian communities can easily fall into, the development of the intercommunity undertakings (zones) will be promoted.24

The above description of the parish structure points to an understanding of basic community as the smallest structural unit in the parish. Fr. Ruben A. Birondo agrees with the same view in his own account of the small Christian communities of Nabunturan deanery in Davao del Norte.25

Other BCC practitioners in the Philippines have related basic church communities with some Filipino social values and structures. Fr. Ruben Villote even thinks that the concept of basic community is not new to the Filipino: "His 'hiya,' 'utang-na-loob,' 'pakikisama,' 'bayanihan,' etc. are indigenous values which identify him as a Filipino, and which not only characterize but also constitute the beginnings of a "basic Filipino community.""26 While Fr. Villote sees the roots of the basic church community in Filipino values, Fr. Sean Purcell, C.Ss.R. sees it in existing social structures:

In the Filipino context the small community is there already. We find them in Barrios, Sitios and in squatter areas. They stretch from urban to agro-industrial to rural conditions. These communities are already in existence. The members know each other emotionally and meet each other face to face. This is the sociological community. The question that faces us is how to christianize it; how to make it also a faith community.27

27. Sean Purcell, "Small Christian Communities," 1-2, in "Selected Readings on BCC-CO." (Mimeographed.)
If one agrees with Fr. Purcell, then the use of basic Christian communities as a pastoral strategy becomes almost mandatory in the local situation.

The foregoing discussion of local documentation on basic church communities tends to show an understanding of basic community in terms of existing social structures. In both the Novachiches and Davao del Norte experiences, the basic Christian community is but the smallest social unit in the existing parish. Fathers Villote and Purcell approach the reality of basic communities from the viewpoint of common values, but still end up with identifying the basic community with the small community that one finds throughout Philippine society.

The approach of BCC-CO is a marked contrast to those already discussed in that it sees the basic church community as a social reality yet to be created. Of course it does not completely reject existing social structures, be it the parish or the small community. Rather it sets norms by which a particular structure can be considered an authentic basic church community. These norms are embodied by the three characteristics expected of these communities, namely, that they be organic, participative, and reasonable.

By organic is meant a community in which members are held together not so much by external bonds, e.g. coercion, geographical areas, or even of profession, as by internal ties of fellowship and oneness. In terms of its faith dimension, this oneness manifests itself in the consciousness of the community as a "people of God." By participative is meant a community which feels the need of other communities, including a mother community, for its survival and well-being. It sees its obligation to the demands of these other communities and at the same time is aware of its rights from them. Finally, by reasonable is meant a community which solves its problems through reason and consensus, and which deals with other sectors of society through dialogue and negotiation. 28

In the rather full explanation of the three characteristics of these communities, the BCC-CO approach makes it clear that the understanding of what a basic community is should be also in terms of these characteristics.

Local usage then of the term 'basic community' can be said to fall along two different directions. Working from what is already

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there, the first builds the basic church community from available social structures. Here ‘basic’ is considered synonymous with ‘smallest social unit’. The second approach, on the other hand, does not readily define ‘basic community’ with whatever social units are already in existence. This is because it understands ‘basic’ in relation to what it considers intrinsic characteristics of community, not in relation to the size of the smallest functioning unit.

At this point, it may be useful to turn to official church documents to situate the two different understandings of ‘basic community’ found in local usage. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* does not describe what a basic community is, though it enumerates examples of basic ecclesial communities, such as religious extensions of the small village, or groups of people linked by age, culture, civic state or social situation. Judging from the diversity of examples named, one may deduce that it leaves open the question of the form of what it considers basic ecclesial community.

The Asian Colloquium of the FABC, on the other hand, explicitly gives a definition of basic community. In no. 44 of its concluding paper, it states:

A group of people is described as a basic community when the number of members is such that they can really know one another, meet with one another, relate to one another. The members are not too far apart to come together fairly frequently. There is a certain degree of permanence among the members. There is also mutual caring, sharing and support. The community strives for common goals and concerns. There is unity and togetherness. 29

Here the emphasis is clearly on the relationship among the members of the basic community. Thus, the basic community becomes whatever social setting that can provide the same qualitative relationships. In the Philippine context, it could be the small neighborhood unit or the organic, participative and reasonable community envisioned by BCC-CO.

Even as one turns to the documents of the *Consejo Episcopal Latino Americano* (CELAM) — certainly the most articulate and comprehensive regarding basic church communities — one finds that the official church refuses to give a normative definition of

basic community. In Medellín, the conference gave a formal rather than material definition as follows:

The Christian ought to find the living of the communion to which he has been called in his "basic community," that is to say, in a community, local or environmental, which corresponds to the reality of a homogenous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact among its members.30

The more recent Puebla conference reiterates this by saying that "it is of the base, because the community consists of a few members in a permanent way, and is germinal to the community at large."31 Both definitions focus more on the internal aspect of the basic community, rather than on its place in the wider society.

Perhaps this lacuna in church teaching is not without reason. It avoids canonizing a particular model of basic community, and thus allows for greater freedom and creativity. Furthermore, it is an acknowledgement of the sociological aspect of basic church communities. While the basic church community is a theological reality inasmuch as Christ is its principle of community, it is nevertheless a sociological reality. Only an integrated approach to the study of basic Christian community can outline the nature of this vital and rich "sign of the times."

SOCILOGICAL INCARNATION: THE DYNAMICS OF BUILDING BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The previous section has tried to point out some of the salient features of basic church communities. Recognizing the inherent difficulty in defining the exact shape of these communities, it discussed the phenomenon by breaking it into its component parts — namely, 'Christian' and 'basic community'. In this manner, the close relationship between basic church communities on the one hand, and evangelization, ministry, and the Reign of God on the other, has been found in the official teaching of the church and documentation of local basic Christian communities. Furthermore,

a study of the usage of ‘basic community’ in the Philippine context shows that it is understood either in terms of existing social structures or certain characteristics considered normative for community. It is clear then that the nature of basic church community transcends any particular formulation.

One reason why defining these communities is so difficult lies in the fact that process plays an essential role in them. Basic church community is a reality, as well as a goal to be achieved. In his description of the small Christian communities in Nabunturan deanery, Fr. Birondo shows acute awareness of this fact:

Building small Christian communities has no set methods, no blue-print, no fixed approach. There are many factors which come into play in the process of building them that a plan in black and white can only hinder. The people’s level of thinking, the socio-political and economic factors in a given area, the terrain, the history of the place, the personality of the change agents, etc. — all these enter into the final concoction of the brew and at the same time make each process unique.\textsuperscript{32}

Because of this importance of process in building basic church community, there is need to discuss the dynamics involved in this process.

Local documentation points to two general forms of the sociological incarnation of the basic church community. The first is largely geographical in form; the other, sectoral. Other forms also exist, but they can be considered in relation to these two.

1. \textit{Neighborhood: Place of Worship and Community Concern}

One sociological incarnation of the basic church community is constituted in terms of the neighborhood, which is seen as the core of the basic community. Even prior to the use of building basic church communities as a pastoral strategy, these neighborhood communities have already been in existence. In connection with this, Fr. Gabriel mentions an interesting experience he had in his Novaliches parish:

In a meeting held in one of the subdivisions, one of the leaders had this to

\textsuperscript{32} Birondo, "Nabunturan," 19.
say when asked about his expectations of the Parish and the Parish Priest. “Father, you are new to us. We have started this community long before you came here. With and without our former Parish Priest’s consent and knowledge. Respect what we have to offer. Take us where we are, how we are.”

It is the existence of such groups as well as their power and influence, which a BCC program can capitalize on.

Once the neighborhood has been identified as the basic community, then the task of building it into a basic church community begins. In the Filipino context, this usually occurs in either of two directions — liturgy and community issues.

A common feature of the Philippine terrain, whether in rural Mindanao or urban Manila, is the existence of a string of churches and chapels. This is even reflected in the vernacular languages, which have a variety of words for these structures — ‘simbahan’, ‘kapilya’, ‘bisita’, ‘tuklong’, and others. The presence of these structures of varying sizes and shapes parallels the existence of some basic neighborhood community. In fact, some places have the tradition in which families in the neighborhood take turns in arranging and decorating the church or chapel. It is this total social context that a liturgically-oriented basic church community builds on.

For instance, after the chapel was accepted as an already existing base, the initial move in the BCC program in Davao del Norte was to activate the chapels:

In the five parishes of the deanery, the movement to reactivate and to re-orient the barrio chapel organization was parish-wide. Some chapels needed only encouragement to re-organize; others had to be ordered to do so. There were no pilot projects or prototypes because the priests believed in equal opportunities for everybody.

The chapel thus becomes the center of worship for the basic church community. Worship would usually consist in Bible reflection, sharing of faith experiences, and some common action. Distribution of the Eucharist also takes place in these liturgical or para-liturgical functions.

Given this context for the basic church community, the role and formation of lay ministers also center on the chapel. In the Prelature of Tagum, these communities have identified the need for a chapel leader and a prayer leader, and they have devised appropriate formation programs for both types of ministers.  

In other areas, however, the liturgically-oriented basic church community has deliberately moved away from the chapel. This may be due to a variety of reasons, some theological, others practical. From a theological view, undue emphasis on the chapel as place of worship may lead to a formalistic and less incarnational understanding of Christianity — God being present only in the chapel and not in the backyard. A move away from the chapel may, at times, be also pastorally indicated, as when the families controlling the chapel are not acceptable to the community. For these reasons as well as others, some programs have encouraged the liturgical or para-liturgical activities of these communities to be held in the neighborhood itself. The KRISKA program is the prime example of this type of worship-oriented basic church community in a neighborhood context. In this program, the regular activity consists of the weekly "Pagpupulong sa Kristiyanong Pamumuhay" conducted in the house of one member and consisting of a Bible reading, sharing on the reading, and action in behalf of both.

There is, however, another direction in which basic church communities in the neighborhood have been known to move, that is, along the path of community issues. These basic Christian communities do not use worship per se as the main focus, but issues in the neighborhood, understood thus:

By "issues" here are meant common problems as perceived and felt by the people of the community itself, and which arise from basic yet unfulfilled human need. And it is the satisfaction of these needs that forms both the rallying point of unity and motivating force in their education.

Examples of these neighborhood issues would be the lack of water, the need for electricity, or legal titles to their land. Thus what holds the community together is not simply traditional Filipino

social values or participation in common liturgical activities, but their common concern for the needs of their community.

In these communities which use the methodology of community organization, the Christian community’s character is emphatically linked with the united effort to resolve these issues. Bible reflections and even liturgy center around the issues, and celebrate the various phases in the effort to attain them:

Thus community reflections on these “problematized” situations in the context of God’s saving and liberating power, and the prayerful sharing of ideas in the light of Christian revelation through Scriptures hopefully bring about God’s authentic presence in their midst. In this way, liturgy, whether in victory celebrations of resolved issues or in group intercessory prayers for on-going issues, becomes a living confession of a people’s belief in God...37

What actually occurs in these activities is the birth of a new religious culture within the neighborhood community.

The neighborhood community then can be one valid sociological incarnation of the basic Christian community. There is ample evidence from local experience, whether rural or urban, that basic church communities are viable within a neighborhood setting. These communities may focus their attention in liturgical activities in the neighborhood chapel or in their homes. However, there are those communities whose vitality revolves around community issues as such. Even the faith dimension of these communities is in terms of these issues.

2. Sectoral Class: Basis for United Action and Faith

While building basic church communities can be and has been done in the context of a neighborhood, another process has been to use sectoral class as a starting point for Christian community. Instead of identifying the neighborhood community as the core of the basic Christian community, this pastoral strategy analyzes the various sectors in the situation, particularly with regard to their participation in the social, economic, and political life of society. Once these various sectors are isolated, then their organization into basic church communities can be initiated.

37. Ibid. 6.
As in basic church communities which employ the principles and tactics of community organization in a neighborhood setting, the building of basic Christian communities from sectoral class proceeds with the identification of issues involving the sector. For example, the peasants of Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija perceived the logging and sawmill operations in their area as their own issue; while the fishermen of Zumarraga in Samar complained about trawl fishing in Maqueda Bay. Once this initial step of issue-identification has taken place, then all the activities of the sectoral basic church community are colored, if not actually dominated by these sectoral issues.

The experience of the peasants in Gabaldon is a case in point. Eighty percent of the town were farmers, with majority earning only ₱150-250 per month. Some five percent were workers, and the others are distributed among the other sectors. With such a situation and the use of sectoral issues as point of entry to build basic Christian communities, the entire pastoral approach revolved around the different issues of the sectors. Liturgical celebrations incorporated discussion of these issues; for example, one on the feudal structure of land ownership during baptism. Furthermore, even traditional organizations were revitalized but with a new thrust. A cofradia of farmers called the “Cofradia de San Isidro” was formed, just as a “Samahan ng mga Ina ng Laging Saklolo.”

In this strategy then for building basic Christian communities, there is strong emphasis on sectoral class as the basis for common action and faith. Christian involvement is not simply centered on liturgical services or even issues within the neighborhood, but on sectoral issues. Both personal and communal faith are similarly founded on these issues.

What results this pastoral approach has achieved is difficult to express in a general way. Perhaps the following reflections on the experience of a workers’ basic church community in Palanan, Isabela may be helpful:

The key values which the workers would repeatedly stress to answer these questions are kata rungan, karapat-dapat, katotohanan, pag-isib, pakikiisa, walang takot, at ang Krus [justice, right, truth, love, unity, absence of

fear, and the Cross]. The workers continually and naturally emphasize the relationship of their struggle for justice with scriptural teaching. They consider it a responsibility to constantly wage war against their personal interests to act for the common good. They have developed a clarity of vision regarding their rights and responsibilities and consider it a basic task to enlighten others about the need to speak the truth and to struggle for justice. This "others" include management and labor officials. They see this as an exercise of love as they truly overcome their fears. 39

These particular reflections were occasioned by the query whether sectoral basic church communities were divisive, and they reveal a different understanding of unity in faith and action. This unity is based on the concerns of the sectoral class, which incarnates for them authentic Christian community.

SOCIO-PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Basic church communities exist within a wider social situation and, as such, cannot but relate to this situation, whether implicitly or explicitly. In fact, the two sociological incarnations of the basic church community in the Philippine context already betray some understanding of Philippine society. The first uses the existing neighborhood community as foundation of the basic church community, thereby recognizing the neighborhood community as a crucial social structure in Philippine life. The second sociological form of the basic Christian community, on the other hand, considers one's participation in the socio-economic activity within the wider society as the key element in building true human and Christian community. In this way, sectoral class becomes the foundation of the basic church community.

The relation to the wider social situation found in the task of building basic Christian communities lies in the socio-pastoral implications of these communities. Being new in the Philippine scene, the emergence of basic church communities at least modifies existing social configurations both within and without the church. Past and present government attitudes towards this phenomenon are a recognition of the social implications that these

communities have or can have. It was well-known that the Marcos regime generally considered these communities as subversive. It is with this background that the following section of this paper discusses two important socio-pastoral implications of these basic church communities. One of these has to do with the understanding of the social situation; the other with social structures.

1. Social Analysis: A New Tool for Pastoral Ministry

Theological reflection growing from existing basic Christian communities has increasingly situated Christian life and work within the total social context of our day. In this the need for a better understanding of that social context becomes both useful and essential for such a reflection, and social analysis responds to this need.

Particular communities and programs for the establishment of basic church communities accept social analysis in varying degrees, and also employ a wide variety of forms for social analysis. Some concentrate on an analysis of the local level, one example of which is Fr. Villote’s description of Tipas and Punta:

Both the Tipas and Punta communities are politically zoned according to barangay. The “barangay,” incidentally, is the historic Filipino concept of community, but since the barangay today has become part of a “bureaucratic mandate” (and therefore imposed from above), it is still the freely initiated “magkakapatidbahay” and “magkakababayang” groupings which constitute the more natural and stable basic communities both in Tipas and Punta.40

With such an analysis, the building of basic church communities in Tipas and Punta capitalizes on the neighborhood and regional groups.

Other basic church communities, however, employ a form of social analysis that covers the micro, macro and meta levels of society, and that concentrates on the economic, political, social, and cultural structures operating within that society. For example, at the National Consultation of BCC-CO, the participants arrived at the following summary of the present social situation:

a) We live in a society where only a few have economic and political power.
b) Where there exist classes, conflicts and contradictions.
c) Where the economy is semi-feudal and neo-colonial, and the political scene is dominated by the US-Marcos-military power structure.
d) Where the Church maintains a dualist concept and praxis of faith.\(^{41}\)

This form of social analysis is commonly known as structural analysis within which the group situated the reality of basic church communities.

The existence of these different forms of social analysis has raised the question of choosing which form to use. The question which some identify with particular political groups and therefore see as counter-productive for basic church communities. Renato A. Ocampo’s assessment of its usefulness and limitation in the Philippine situation proves helpful. He writes that the usefulness of structural analysis consists in its “(1) giving a sense of overall direction to events, (2) inspiring a strong determination to assume the role of being agents for change, and (3) challenging our capacity to pose significant questions at our human experiences.”\(^{42}\) Its primary limitation has to do with “its being mistakenly regarded as the whole of reality.”\(^{43}\)

It is on account of this limitation that Bishop Francisco Claver has stressed the importance of cultural analysis. He describes this form of social analysis thus:

In cultural analysis we will be concerned with those aspects of a people’s way of life — culture, that is — which moves them to perceptible patterns of thought and behavior. Our particular interest then will focus on cultural values — what a people consider good; ideals and goals — what they aspire for in social interaction; laws and norms — the often unwritten prescriptions for behavior deemed fitting; worldviews and outlooks on life — general themes, if any, that guide them in their over-all perception of and approach to life.\(^{44}\)

The rationale for cultural analysis then lies in this: “social change, if it is to take — and take in a humane way, must proceed along

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41. “BCC-CO Consultation,” 105.
43. Ibid. 15.
both structural and cultural lines, never one without the other.”

Thus, whatever forms of social analysis one uses, one cannot deny that the very task of building basic church communities implies some social analysis. Furthermore, social analysis in the context of the Third World shows that building basic church communities is properly a pastoral ministry for the poor, deprived and oppressed in society. The KRISKA program accepts this, when it translates ‘basic Christian community’ into ‘maliliit na sambayanang Kristiyanong’ (MSK) and explains it thus:

_Tayo'y nagiging MSK (BCC) kung ang mga maliliit nating kababayan, ang mga aba at api, ang unang inaasikaso, pinahahalagahan, pinaglilingkuran, unang nabubuong sambayanang Kristiyanong. Sila ang tunay na saligan at batayan ng pagbabago sa lipunan na makatarungan._

(We become MSK (BCC) when the _small_ in our nation, the poor and the oppressed, are _first_ ministered to, valued, served, _first_ formed into Christian community. They are the true foundation and basis for just social change.)

Here “maliliit” is used to refer to size, but more significantly to social status.

The idea that basic Christian communities are primarily for the poor finds an echo in the meeting of CELAM at Puebla. In the section of its final document dealing with “Basic Christian Communities, Parishes, The Local Church,” it states:

_The “Basic Community” is an expression of the Church’s preferential love for the poor. In these communities popular religiosity is expressed, appreciated, and purified, and these communities also afford the concrete possibility of participation in the Church’s task, and in the commitment to transform the world._

With this recognition of the bond between basic church communities and the situation of the poor in society, the importance of social analysis as a tool for pastoral ministry becomes similarly recognized.

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46. Ibid. 60.
47. CELAM Conference at Puebla, 59.
2. Circular Structures: A New Form of Common Christian Life

If the first socio-pastoral implication is related to one’s understanding of the social situation, the second important implication is structural in nature. By virtue of the character and dynamics of basic church communities, they develop new social relations both within and without.

In local usage, the social relations meant to be found in basic church communities are expressed in their description as

self-nourishing (faith-experience and prayer-life),
self-sustaining (maximum use of their own resources),
self-governing (equality and participation in decision-making),
small Christian communities (serving, worshipping, witnessing). 48

The above formulation has become a cliche among BCC practitioners, but it nevertheless gives an idea of what type of social relations are encouraged in these communities. There is great emphasis in the basic church community on its ability to maintain itself. Thus, self-reliance is another cherished value. Moreover, the organizational set-up of these communities insures maximum participation as well as equality.

The above values of basic church communities in terms of structure take shape in a variety of ways and involves painstaking processes. Structural reformulation usually begins with the traditional patterns of leadership being broken in the smallest cell. One such pattern would be the primacy of the “authority of person” and the pyramidal structure that it engenders. 49 Instead of this, sharing of leadership and division of roles characterize the process of government within the cell. What slowly emerges in the unit is a structure more circular in nature rather than hierarchical.

Once the fundamental shift has taken place within the cell, it moves on to the bigger social structures within the parish or even the diocese. What this means has been expressed in the following manner:

Equality and participation are central ideas. The Church is the people of God. At the risk of oversimplification we can say that formerly the Church

was Hierarchy without community, whereas now the vision we have is one of community with ministerial structure, the ministries coming from within the self-governing, self-nourishing and self-sustaining community.  

Here one sees the structural changes that can be brought about by building basic church communities as pastoral strategy.

Thus far, the discussion has concentrated on the implication of basic church communities inasmuch as church structures are concerned. However, since these communities exist within the wider social situation, they also have some effect on it. In some sense, this effect is indirect because the wider social situation is not within the jurisdiction of the church; but it is nonetheless real and, to some quarters in society, threatening.

Because basic church communities structure themselves more like a circle rather than a pyramid, this structural change tends to spread to the other social structures affecting the people’s lives. Once the people experience true equality and participation in church structures, whether this be on the level of the small cell or the entire diocese, then they will no longer be content to being passive victims of socio-political, economic and cultural systems. This transfer of learning is inevitable, and results in conscientization, understood as “experiencing the dignity of the human person, becoming aware of the causes and effects of sin (social and personal) and unjust structures, and boosting their hopes for change thru their own organized efforts.”

Aside from this mechanism of the transfer of learning, there is, however, a deeper reason for the wider reaching effect of basic church communities on society at large. These communities have a witness value against the status quo. Keener to the “signs of the times” than other official groups in the church, the Latin American bishops singularly emphasize this role of basic church communities:

Christians united in the ecclesial basic community deepening their adherence to Christ, seek a more evangelical life at the heart of the community. They work together to question the selfish roots of consumer society, and bring to light the vocation of communion with God and with their broth-

ers and sisters, by offering a valuable starting point in the building of a new society, a "civilization of love."  

In the final analysis, this evangelical witness of these communities will be their most powerful means of effecting change in the wider social structures.

In the Philippine context, some indications of this witness value of basic church communities are already evident. In Tagum, Davao the following account of how these communities work shows the Christian maturity present within them:

In one parish a group of people from a small Christian Community were evicted from their land. Their homes and crops were bulldozed to make way for a plantation. The parish priest took steps to stop the destruction so that justice and fairness could prevail. In the meantime twenty-eight other small Christian Communities organized to feed, clothe and shelter the people in their need. Christian Communities in Action!  

As a final example, one can quote a part of the statement of goals that grassroots pastoral workers from Isabela wrote:

We envision the formation of a community. This is the Christian and wholesome coming together of people. We can identify this community by the following characteristics:

a) one direction, vision and action based on common faith
b) there is care and concern for one another and for the majority, especially the suffering and oppressed
c) there is no envy or hard feelings for one another
d) there is sharing, no one getting for himself more than his due or more than what he needs to love humanity

e) there is equality and justice.

Originally written in Ilocano, the statement touchingly yet firmly expresses the power of basic church communities to transform social structures.

52. CELAM Conference at Puebla, 59.
THE FUTURE OF BASIC CHURCH COMMUNITIES?

This section of the essay on Filipino Christianity dealt with the emergence of basic church communities as a new current in the local scene. Using documentation from different church communities within the context of theological and magisterial reflection, it discussed the nature of basic church communities, the dynamics involved in organizing them, and their socio-pastoral implications.

In spite of their complex and as yet evolving nature, basic church communities have given vitality and spirit to those parts of the Philippine church which have accepted them. They have been organized in either neighborhood or sectoral settings, and in both, have proven themselves as viable forms of authentic community. Being a particular sociological incarnation of Christian community, they have specific socio-pastoral implications. They underline the need for social analysis as a component for pastoral ministry, and alter traditional social structures, both within and outside them.

There have been weaknesses associated with building these communities, as has been duly noted by the study of Ocampo mentioned above. But they are outweighed by the positive experience of many basic church communities, even those in a tribal setting. However, what the lasting impact of basic church communities will be remains to be seen. It will depend on their ability to relate to the heritage of Christianity in the Philippines. This interaction between these two currents in Filipino Christianity — the traditional form of faith and the emergence of basic church communities — will be the subject of the final section of this essay.

(The third and last section of this article will appear in the next issue.)

55. Ocampo, "Two Basic Christian Communities."