THE FUTURE OF FILIPINO CHRISTIANITY?

Like a network of brooks, rivers, and tributaries, Filipino Christianity is an intricate and dynamic reality. The present paper, having discussed in the preceding sections two important currents within it, ends with an essay as a discursive attempt to project the future of both currents in the context of Christian social mission. This concluding essay consists in initially examining how both currents relate to the basics of Christian social mission, and then extrapolating their possible interaction with one another. It is proposed that Filipino Christianity will fulfill its social mission only through the integration of both currents — specifically, only if the traditional form of faith finds new structures to carry its meanings, and if the emerging basic church communities are able to generate culturally-rooted religious symbols and rituals.

The first current, named as the traditional form of faith, consists in the religious heritage of Filipino Christianity. Related to the official church in diverse ways, it is neither religiosity under the control of church authorities nor simply a syncretic mixture of elements with no intelligibility. Rather it displays an ingenious system of beliefs, values, practices and rituals — all organized to create a sacred nomos.

The second current affecting some sections of Filipino Christianity is the emergence of basic church communities. In contrast to the first, it is a recent phenomenon; nonetheless, it has already

*The first and second sections of this article appeared in Landes 2 (Jan./July 1988) 25-64 and 165-93.
shown vitality in the variety of concrete forms that it has taken. Basic church communities provide a concrete path of authentic human and Christian coming together, and therefore confront existing social structures, whether secular or religious.

BASICS OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL MISSION

The basics of Christian social mission may be articulated in terms of three themes: the relationship between salvation and human concerns, the value of the human person, and the eschatological nature of salvation.

The initial cornerstone of Christian social mission lies in its proclamation of "new heavens and a new earth" — "a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride prepared to meet her husband" (Rev 21:1-2). Underneath the apocalyptic imagery and in the context of early Christian thought, these verses express a view of salvation that is deeply rooted in human life and society. This view of salvation has been languaged in various ways throughout the history of Christianity. But whichever way it is articulated, it rejects a manichean understanding and practice of faith totally divorced from human concerns.

Of late, there has been a renewed emphasis on the integral relationship between faith and human concerns, the new classic statement of which was provided by the 1971 Synod of Bishops: "Action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel . . ."¹ Even earlier (1968) and more specific, the 1968 Assembly of the World Council of Churches declared that "no structures — ecclesiastical, industrial, governmental or international — lie outside the scope of the Churches' task as they seek to carry out their prophetic role in understanding the will of God for all men."²

This renewed emphasis did not escape criticism from within and outside the different churches, and therefore has generated much

---

heated discussion. An early example of such an exchange occurred between Charles Elliott, author of *Development Debate*, and Edward Norman, who claimed in his 1978 Reith Lectures that “Christianity was once about human fallibility, about the worthlessness of all earthly expectations” but now “is seemingly preoccupied with human capabilities.”

Today, while the discussion has not died down and in some quarters became polarized, there is a wide consensus around a ‘centrist’ position, the most representative exponent of which may be John Paul II. In his many speeches during his pastoral visits, John Paul II proclaims, as he did in Brazil, that

Evangelization, the *raison d’être* of any ecclesial community, would not be complete if it did not keep in mind the relations existing between the message of the Gospel and man’s personal and social life, between the commandment of love for one’s suffering neighbor and the concrete situations and injustice to be combatted and of justice and peace to be established.4

Hence, “the true apostle of the Gospel is he who humanizes and evangelizes at the same time, in the certainty that he who evangelizes also civilizes.”5

Intimately connected with this initial cornerstone — the integral relationship between salvation and human concerns — is the second theme of Christian social mission, the primary value of the human person. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the latest social encyclical, draws this from the tradition of Catholic social teaching, and affirms it in the opening sentence, stating that the social concern of the church is “directed toward an authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human person.”6 Moreover, a lengthy section of the encyclical entitled “Survey of the Contemporary World” details the innumerable ways in which the world has not respected the human person.

5. Ibid. 275.
If there is this consistent theme, it is because the foundation of the primary value of the human person lies on more than any secular humanist ideal. Ricardo Antoncich and José Miguel Munárriz describe this foundation in their study of church social teaching:

La revelacion nos dice dos cosas de extraordinaria importancia: que el hombre es imagen de Dios y que Dios mismo, en la persona del Verbo, se hizo carne, se hizo hombre. Estas dos verdades encierran la comprensión de la “persona solidaria” como definición del hombre; ambas verdades nos remiten a la comunión de las personas divinas, porque Dios se revela en su misterio trinitario, y a la comunión de las personas humanas, porque el proyecto que Dios quiere ver realizado entre los hombres (su reino) es precisamente el de la comunión de los hombres entre sí por la fraternidad, y con Dios por la filiación.7

The foundation then for affirming the primary value of the human person finally comes from God’s revelation.

In the light of the value of the human person founded as it is on revelation, the understanding of relationships within society assumes a distinctly Christian character. According to David Hollenbach, there can exist “a Christian theory of justice and an explicitly Christian obligation to seek this justice, both of which are rooted in the covenant love of God for all persons and in the fulfillment of this love in the death and resurrection of Christ”; moreover, “this theory of justice grants the equal claims of all persons to those goods and the kind of participation in society which are essential to their dignity as persons.”8 This then is the concrete task of Christian social mission: to promote social relationships which recognize human dignity as their foundation, cause, and goal.

The third theme of Christian social mission — the eschatological nature of salvation — qualifies the preceding two. Human concerns are integrally related to salvation, and human persons have their deepest dignity in God. However, all that is human finds complete fulfillment at the eschaton, “the last times.” What this theme

means has often been naively understood in terms of "an eternal reward in heaven for the just," and as a result, Christian involvement in the world was disregarded.

What the eschatological nature of salvation fundamentally points to is the reality of God's grace, that everything is from God. There are many other ways of languaging this, but the stark expression of Vincent Cosmao's book, Changing the World: An Agenda for the Churches, seems most appropriate. After arguing passionately for the churches' role in changing the world, Cosmao ends with the following proposition of God’s transcendence: "God alone is God." Far from diminishing the role of Christian involvement in the world, this expression of the eschatological nature of salvation deepens this role:

The realization that God alone is God opens up a broad field of action for humanity. No mastery is ruled out once its necessity becomes evident. God is not the guardian of any natural or divine order that is to be left untouched. God's presence-in-absence removes all the taboos with which human beings surround themselves to delimit 'the realm of the feared unknown.'

Because of God's transcendence then, "everything else is task to be accomplished, a task to be picked up again and again from the beginning." At the same time that it provides the impetus for all to apply themselves to this task, the transcendence of God also prevents the equation of salvation with the human achievements of the task. This has significant repercussions for Christian social mission, especially with regard to its work of building social relationships based on human dignity. These repercussions are drawn out in a collection of essays aptly called Above Every Name: The Lordship of Jesus and Social Systems:

God's kingdom can be anticipated and prefigured in history, through the persevering effort to create structures of peace and justice. But no historical embodiment will ever flawlessly realize the human and Christian dream of peace on earth, the new heavens and new earth where justice

10. Ibid. 105.
dwell. No politico-economic system, whether bearing the name of capitalist, socialist or distributive, will ever constitute a definitive status quo beyond the need of criticism and reform. 11

It is by way of this ‘‘eschatological proviso’’ that the third theme of Christian social mission qualifies the task of establishing social relationships founded on mutuality and reciprocity among persons of equal dignity: “Christian faith affirms that the full achievement of this mutuality and reciprocity is an eschatological hope, to be realized only in the kingdom of God.” 12

As mentioned above, the basics of Christian social mission has been described in terms of three themes — the relationship between salvation and human concerns, the value of the human person, and the eschatological nature of salvation. Far from being recent, they have provided the basis for 100 years of Vatican social teaching which Donal Dorr summarizes thus:

the coherence or consistent character of the teaching is based on an enduring commitment of the Church to certain basic values such as human dignity, the right of everybody to the conditions required to be free and responsible, the importance of human community, and the notion of the common good as meaning the welfare of all — in a way that gives priority to the person rather than the State. 13

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TWO CURRENTS

Having set the basics of Christian social mission, this essay continues with an initial assessment of the two currents in Filipino Christianity. Now the data presented in the preceding sections may be thematized in relation to the social mission of the church.

It has been mentioned that Christian social mission is initially founded on the task of ‘‘creating new heavens and a new earth,’’ thereby rejecting any manichean view of the human and of society. In a sense, the traditional form of faith also rejects this view. The underlying behavioral principles of the traditional form of faith show that the religious and the other aspects of human experience

are seen as a continuum. The development of Philippine religious literature as well as the role of ritual in Philippine culture manifest this basic unity. Here the traditional form of faith can, at least, be fertile ground for carrying out Christianity’s social mission.

However, this cannot be unless a definite qualification is made. While the religious indeed is not alien to human concerns, it should not engulf all other aspects of human existence, leading to total sacralization. Juan Carlos Scanone rightly warns that sacralization leads to a socially conservative position: "La postura 'sacralizante' tendía a confundir una determinada cultura o estructuración social con el cristianismo, como si fueran la cultura o sociedad cristianas." But the solution does not lie in dismantling the basic unity of the traditional form of faith, as might have happened in European and North American Christianity.

In the case of basic Christian communities, the inseparability yet distinction between the religious and the other aspects of human experience is more easily safeguarded because of the influence of the social sciences. This is largely found in the use of social analysis, both structural and cultural, as a tool for pastoral ministry. Whatever be the concrete form of this analysis, it respects the basic unity of all aspects in personal and social experience without the danger of sacralization. This danger often exists only in those basic church communities which emphasize formal religion, such as may be found in certain charismatic groups. Even more than in the traditional form of faith, the sacralization in these communities becomes more total inasmuch as these communities are better structured.

Aside from the integral relationship between salvation and the concerns of human life, another theme of Christian social mission is the insistence on the primary value of the human person. With regard to this, one can initially say that both the traditional form of faith and the different models of basic church communities share in this concern. Philippine culture, after all, tends to be person-oriented because of its personalistic nature. Moreover, the thrust of basic church communities provides precisely for a social situation in which personal growth and interpersonal interaction are maximized.

There are also in these two currents of Filipino Christianity social structures which protect the value of the person. In the traditional form of faith, the extended family insures that individuals feel a sense of unity and solidarity. Situated in the local context, basic church communities use neighborhood and sectoral groupings for the same purpose.

But Christian social mission does not only mean concern for the human person manifested in the personal rapport among individuals. More significantly, it is proven by effective love of neighbor. Here the traditional form of faith has as one of its normative principles love for one’s neighbor. Inspite of its ‘other-worldly’ orientation, it exhorts Christians to help those in need, material or otherwise. This is further reinforced by Christ’s behavior which is taken as normative for the Christian.

There is a limitation, though, in the understanding of helping one’s neighbor in the traditional form of faith. Because Christ is seen as the model for Christian behavior, then the range of what he is considered to have actually done for others becomes the same range of behavior available for the Christian. Thus it is difficult to introduce to someone steeped in the traditional form of faith more contemporary expressions of loving one’s neighbor, like rallying for the freedom of the poor. Here the basic stance of Segundo Galilea regarding people’s religiosity becomes useful and sound theology:

Ello supone el ejercicio crítico de la misma fe que ofrece el evangelio y que se confronta con la “fe popular” para purificarla, denunciando en ella todo lo “inhumano” implicado. Si todo valor religioso es también valor humano, toda degradación religiosa es igualmente deshumanizante.15

Thus, the traditional form of faith should be purified of its alienating features, and this comes about when the Gospel is brought to bear upon it.

Basic church communities, on the other hand, do not have this limitation in expressing effective love of neighbor in new ways. As a new phenomenon, it has the flexibility that the traditional form of faith does not seem to have. More significantly, the conjunction

of the theological concept of 'ministry' with the definition of basic church community already indicates to what extent service is an integral aspect of these communities. In fact, in the experience of these communities in the Philippines, new and diverse forms of ministries such as those of Christian community organizers have arisen within them.

The stress on effective love of neighbor, so central to Christian social mission, is reflected in basic church communities in still another way. Basic church communities — whether of the neighborhood or sectoral form — are sociological incarnations of Christian community. As such, they consciously try to uphold relationships within the communities and without, which are socially just and respectful of human dignity.

The final theme of Christian social mission deals with the eschatological character of salvation. As far as the traditional form of faith is concerned, one must immediately add that this eschatological character and the 'other-worldly' orientation of the traditional form of faith are worlds away. Consciousness that the coming of the Reign of Justice is God's grace does not and must never lead to a denigration of human activity, especially in the social sphere. This denigration, however, is an ever-present temptation in the traditional form of faith.

A corollary to the eschatological character of salvation is the relativization of any social theory or model within Christian faith. Social theories and models are both useful and necessary, but none can claim to an intrinsic Christian signification.

This corollary carries a considerable implication with regard to basic church communities which are, implicitly or explicitly, founded on some form of social analysis. This social analysis, in turn, is a part of or the entire body of a particular social theory or model. Thus basic church communities always run the risk of being tied to the particular social analysis on which they are founded. Once this happens, that particular basic church community becomes a counter-sign to the Reign of God, and fails in fulfilling the social mission of Christianity.

The preceding has evaluated both currents of Filipino Christianity in the light of the basic themes of Christian social mission. It has found out in what particular ways the values, ethos and worldviews of both facilitate or hinder the social task of Christianity. However, it has not been the primary object of the preceding to
compare the two currents and to judge which of the two is a better carrier of Christian social mission. A comparison would have been impossible on account of two reasons. First, these two currents are obviously very different in nature. One is rooted in the past; the other is quite recent. The traditional form of faith is an implicit worldview underneath the surface phenomena of religious practices, rituals and literature; basic church communities consist of visible social structures. Secondly and more significantly, these two currents are dynamic realities within Filipino Christianity. Thus they interact, support or cancel each other as far as social mission is concerned.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATION OF THE TWO CURRENTS

What remains to be done would be to describe the possible interaction between these two currents in the light of Christian social mission. By proposing matrix for understanding the traditional form of faith and a sketch of basic church communities, previous sections point to some elements which shape the dynamics of the interaction, and which may provide clues as to how Filipino Christianity may be able to continue its social task. In brief, the vitality of Filipino Christianity will depend on the continuing development and integration of the two currents that have been described.

With regard to the traditional form of faith, the most pressing need for it would be the discovery of new social structures which will serve as its carriers of meaning. The analysis of this form of faith has shown that its strength is closely related to the structures of the extended family and feudal stratification in rural areas — both of which are beginning to change rapidly as a result of developments in the wider society and in Christianity.

The various developments in Filipino society from the turn of the century onwards spell the one reality of change. In connection with this, Doepers' study of Manila proves helpful as it accurately summarizes the quality as well as the amount of change in this urban center:

The most notable alterations included a rapid expansion of educational opportunity; an escalated flow of migration from province to metropolis; increasingly technical occupational requirements and bureaucrati-
zation in the growing modern sector of the economy; changes in the ethnic division of labor; significant rates of career mobility in some parts of the system; and the emergence of new forms of worker solidarity and class conflict. 16

Moreover, since Manila was and remains the primary Philippine city, these changes had an impact beyond its boundaries and prefigured what other urban centers were to experience at a later time.

Regardless of whether one uses ‘modernization’ as cover term for these changes and of however one evaluates them, it cannot be denied that these changes have affected the structural base of the traditional form of faith. This is clearly exemplified by Tiongson’s study of religious drama in Malolos, Bulacan. Tiongson perceives a decline in this kind of drama from the 1960s because many members of peasant families have had to seek employment outside Malolos. He narrates, as an example, what happened when Ka Luis, the director in barrio Ligas, was trying to form the cast:


(“There are 365 days in one year,” he began. “I’m simply asking for two days, why can’t you give that?” The people spoke directly. “Our foreman told us to go to work; otherwise, our pay may be decreased.” Ka Luis was not able to say anything because he realized that he could not shoulder the salary deduction if he compelled them not to work for two days.)

Thus the previous participants in the Holy Week play were no longer farmers but workers, and “di tulad ng magsasaka, ang namamasukan ay walang sariling oras o araw, lalo na’t kung di-palagan o kasuwal lamang siya o dili kaya, minamadali ang trabaho ng kontratista [unlike the farmer, the worker does not have his own


hours or days, especially if a temporary employee or merely a casual, or if the contractor rushes the completion of the job.'

Concomitant with this change in the economic situation of the village is a corresponding culture change. As Tiongson observes, the decline of religious drama in Malolos is not the result of a rejection of religion but a change in taste:

_Bilang paglalagom, makikitang may sapat pang paniniwala ang mga tao sa relihiyon upang panoorin nila ang Sinakulo. Ngunit dahil sa pagpasok ng bagong kultura, mahirap na nilang magustuhan ang Sinakulo. . . . Ano nga ba ang laban ng Sinakulo, tambakan man ito ng mahika at engkanto, sa isang pelikula ni James Bond?_

(As conclusion, one can see that the people have enough belief in religion to watch the _Sinakulo_. But because of the coming of new culture, it is difficult for them to like the _Sinakulo_. . . . After all, what competition can the _Sinakulo_ offer, even with lots of magic and enchantment, with a James Bond movie?)

When some traditional practices lose popularity then, this is not a sign per se of the death of the traditional form of faith but simply an indication of the changes in its supporting structures. Hence, the need for the traditional form of faith to find new structures which will be its carriers of meaning.

Aside from these changes in Philippine society, there have also been developments within Christianity that have affected the traditional form of faith, the most important one of which has been the emergence of basic church communities. Right from the start, these new ecclesial structures represented change initiated and sanctioned from above. They were introduced and established in the local context out of the theological conviction that Christian community is of primary importance, and they are therefore conceived as the social incarnation of this conviction.

In the different parishes and dioceses where basic church communities were to grow, the bearers of this conviction were clerics, religious or lay people who were abreast with new theological ideas and recent church teachings supportive of these communities. The introduction of basic communities were at times wel-

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid. 185.
comed, and at other occasions resisted. One gets the impression from the survey of bishops’ pastoral priorities that these new ecclesial structures flourish better in areas such as Mindanao where the traditional form of faith has not been rigidly institutionalized in terms of practices and structures. The converse also seems to hold true: they have greatest difficulty in places where the traditional form of faith is deeply entrenched.  

That this is so is not surprising because of the usual conflict between the old and new. But another factor may be involved, and this has to do with the apparent lack of symbol and ritual in local basic church communities. Of course this lack is partly due to their relative newness. However, it could also be due to their particular history in the Philippines — they were structures born more out of theological conviction, less out of actually being Christian together — and social scientists often remark that structures are institutionalizations of shared meanings that are primarily symbolic. Hence, basic church communites in the Philippines need to develop, if not appropriate, integrating symbols and rituals, just as the traditional form of faith needs to find viable structures to carry its meaning. It is through this that the integration of both currents will have to take place.

If this integration does not occur, then the traditional form of faith will continue to exist outside the influence of the churches, and may be increasingly alienated from church leaders. Moreover, because of the great changes in the structures supporting the traditional form of faith, this continued existence will tend to be more focused on the pilgrimage centers of the traditional form of faith, such as Quiapo and Banahaw, and less tied to specific social situations in rural areas.

In a similar way, if basic church communities are unable to appropriate integrating symbols and rituals, then their reach will probably remain limited, if not actually shrink. Even sustaining vitality within this limited number may be a constant struggle because symbol and ritual, more than intellectual conviction, motivate people to come together as community. Unless this is ad-

dressed, the emergence of basic church communities in Filipino Christianity may go the way of promising movements in the churches which — official support notwithstanding — failed to create a wider and lasting impact.

The integration of the traditional form of faith and basic church communities is crucial then if Filipino Christianity is to fulfill its social mission. The preceding assessment of both currents show that they have the major resources to accomplish the demands of this mission. But these two currents can participate in substantive social change only if integration takes place — if basic church communities are able to appropriate fitting symbols and rituals from the traditional form of faith, and at the same time, become themselves the new ecclesial carriers of the shared meanings of this form of faith. Put in another way, the traditional form of faith has to find expression within the structures of basic church communities. This integration will surely change the shape of both currents, but only through it can both hope to be part of what Mojares, in reference to the death of a village and its dramatic tradition, calls “a dying-unto-a-new-life, the uncertain struggling of a new order to be born.”