WHAT HAVE WE BECOME?
Ten Years After PCP II*

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It is very difficult to evaluate events in the Church in the Philippines after the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) without having an understanding of what kind of council PCP II is. This understanding, therefore, will be our starting point. Then, we will discuss the ecclesiological notion of reception and how the Philippine Church has so far received PCP II. Finally, we will have points for reflection.

What Kind of Council is PCP II?

I will first take Article Seven of the conciliar documents of PCP II as a way to understand the self-professed type of council that PCP II had in mind. Article Seven says that the Council was convoked "to take stock of where we are; to look where we are going; to re-animate our life in Jesus Christ; to unite all things in Him." These are four important features of PCP II.

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Philippines was after Vatican II. It asked: Where have we gone? Where are we standing now? Those who convoked the Council thought that a second plenary council was the best venue for the Church in the Philippines to understand where it was standing after the Second Vatican Council. The convenors presupposed that Vatican II was still the main reference point for renewal.

Twenty-six years after Vatican II, PCP II’s Article Six says, “We have changed.” Now, we hope to assess where we have grown. How have we changed? How have we been changed by Vatican II? We not only look at where we are standing now but also at where we are supposed to go, and how to re-animate our life of faith in Jesus Christ so that our direction will be motivated by an effort to unite all things in Jesus Christ.

Let us try to extract from the four important features of PCP II what type of council it is by looking at the presuppositions.

The first presupposition is that Vatican II is the great event of renewal in the Church, and that the Church in the Philippines can say that we have received that renewal initiated by Vatican II.

The other presupposition is that the Church in the Philippines must not lose the momentum of the original people power EDSA event in 1986. The preparation for PCP II started in 1988, two years after EDSA. All through the document, EDSA is referred to. In those important paragraphs where EDSA is mentioned, one goal of PCP II is for the Church to continue reaping the fruits of that moment of grace called EDSA.

These are the two major factors that would shape the orientation of PCP II—the renewal occasioned by Vatican II and the moment of grace that was EDSA which tried to renew Philippine society.

After acknowledging the wonderful things we have received from Vatican II and the miracle of EDSA, the Church in the Philippines still needs to renew itself, especially in the face of the changing realities of the Philippines. There are two major areas of renewal that PCP II calls for.
First is the renewal in the Church’s self-understanding. Here PCP II proposes several images—community of disciples, Church of the Poor, a community in a state of mission. Concomitant to this is the second—a renewal also in the Church’s mission. This is labeled as renewed integral evangelization.

This double renewal must happen in the context of Philippine society, which itself is also very much in need of renewal. Renewal of the Church’s self-understanding and of the Church’s understanding of its mission are not totally ends-in-themselves. They are also at the service of the renewal of the wider Philippine society.

The images used by PCP II in the Church’s self-understanding and the Church’s mission arise from an analysis of the situation in the Philippines.

In PCP II 665, it says that the Philippines is a country of “chronic, almost compulsive dividedness.” What a description. Dividedness is bad in itself but to characterize it as chronic and even compulsive makes it ugly. There is a compulsion to be divided. We cannot control it. We look for it. We search for it.

Because of this situation, the theme of PCP II is to unite all things under Christ. The direct response of PCP II to the chronic, compulsive dividedness of the country is unity. This movement towards unity is seen in the Church’s renewed self-understanding—communion, community of disciples, Church of the Poor—which leads to universal love.

When you go to the side of mission, you will see it qualified as integral—renewed integral evangelization, no salvation without liberation, integrated spirituality. Let us not divide Filipinos among themselves. Let us not also divide faith and justice. Let us not divide worship and ordinary life.

Everything is moving towards unity—unity within the Church, unity in mission. Why? Because the country is chronically divided and compulsively divided.

Thus, what type of council is PCP II?
We can say that PCP II is a council of renewal: 1) renewing the Church’s self-understanding, 2) renewing the Church’s understanding of its mission, and hopefully, 3) renewing the performance of its mission at the service of the transformation of Philippine society. I think any evaluation of the Church in the Philippines and the impact of PCP II on that Church must take into consideration the type or nature of PCP II. When we try to evaluate the impact of PCP II on the Church in the Philippines, I would use those three aspects of renewal.

Look at your communities. Look at your parishes. Look at your dioceses. Is there a renewed understanding of the Church? Is there a renewed understanding and performance of mission? And is Philippine society also renewed into a more united society because the Church has been an effective agent of communion, an effective agent of integral development and evangelization?

The Lens of Reception

One way of reviewing PCP II is by using the category of reception. Instead of just describing what has happened in the Philippine church after PCP II, I would re-phrase the question in terms of, “How did the Church in the Philippines receive PCP II?” The ecclesiological notion of reception means that by the very act of receiving a council, the Church is actually shaping itself according to the vision of that council.

I will use the concept of reception which was made famous by Yves Congar, the great French Dominican theologian who was later made a cardinal. He tried in one long study to retrieve or to recover this notion of reception, most especially perceived in the history of the Church after councils.

Normally after councils or synods, there follows a period of reception. Whatever a council—be it an ecumenical council or a provincial council or a plenary council or a local synod—legislates or offers to the people, it must go through a process of reception, a
process of assimilation. Moreover, one can see, even in our recent history, that so many synods have been convoked but their reception is practically nil. Those synods have been forgotten.

It is easy to hold synods but the crucial process of reception is not guaranteed to be successful. Will the output of the synods be received? Will they be assimilated? Will they be implemented? Thus, I would like to review the ten years after PCP II from the optic of the ecclesiological notion of reception.

One author, Hermann Pottmeyer, says that basically, reception is a spiritual process—it is the acceptance of the gift of God recognized by a Church in a council or synod. There is a faith dimension here. People discern that this council is a gift of God, that the Spirit is offering a gift to the local Church, or in the case of Vatican II, that the universal Church is receiving a gift from the Holy Spirit through the ecumenical council.

Reception is actually an act of discernment—the community discerns that a beautiful gift indeed is given by the Lord. The gift that is offered is received, made its own, appropriated and allowed to work itself in its power so that the Church is transformed in the very process of reception. I receive the gift; I allow the gift to change me.

Reception is actually the key to being transformed but I can receive only if I recognize the gift of God. If people do not receive a council, it is an indication that the people do not see the giftedness of that council, because if people recognize the gift, how can they refuse the gift?

When we talk of the reception of a council, we examine two major elements of reception. One is interpretation and the second is movement.

Reception as interpretation involves primarily an interpretation of the documents, the texts, and the decrees of the council. Very often, this interpretation part of reception is done on an official basis because it is the officials of the Church who are authorized to interpret councils and issue pronouncements. They give addresses,
issue pastoral letters, make decisions, call synods, hold prayer services, etc. What I am saying is this: very often, reception of a council on the level of interpreting documents happens as official reception—how the leaders of the Church, how the leaders of a community or congregation interpret a council. That is one aspect of reception.

And this is easily verified. In a week’s time [a week after this lecture was delivered], bishops will report on the results of the consultations held to review PCP II, and I am sure that many of their reports will be on the level of official interpretation of PCP II—the dioceses that have convoked synods, the offices that they have set up, the pastoral letters that the bishops of the Philippines have issued from 1991 up to now. These are very important, but incomplete, because the council still has to be received by the whole community, by the whole people of God.

Reception of a council must be by the whole body. Which brings us to the second aspect of reception—reception not just as interpretation of documents but also as movement.

Reception as movement is much more difficult to evaluate and to determine because it means the elaboration—in ordinary life, in attitudes, in values, in relationships, in priorities, in lifestyle—of the renewed self-understanding and the renewed sense of mission. We are going beyond letters, synods, desks and offices to an elaboration in life. That is why it is called movement—the dynamism, the so-called spirit of the council is so powerful that it impels individuals and communities to adjust their lifestyles, their attitudes, their frames of minds, their relationships, etc., according to the new understanding of Church and the new understanding of mission.

Reception as movement involves a lot of self-critique—the Church critiquing itself and maybe even distancing itself critically from what it may call its old self, the old person, the old ways. But not because everything old is bad. When we use “old person” here we use it in the sense of St. Paul—the old person under the Law, vis-à-vis the renewed person in Jesus Christ.

Reception as movement involves a painful and courageous act
of critical distancing from the old self and owning the intellectual, spiritual and moral impulses that have generated the renewed self-understanding and renewed sense of mission.

Although this cannot be measured in the same way that we can measure the number of pastoral letters issued and the number of desks assembled and the number of offices established, it remains a crucial aspect of the reception of any council.

Has the council been received in a way that the council can be seen as the source from which a self-critiquing movement, a movement of conversion emanates? After all, it is a council of renewal. Have the people, has the Church in the Philippines, because of PCP II, owned the intellectual, moral, spiritual energies that PCP II offers to us as impulses for a renewed understanding of Church, a renewed understanding of mission and a renewed society?

To arrive at a holistic view of what has happened to the Church in the Philippines after PCP II, and how the Church in the Philippines has received PCP II, I think we should consider the two aspects of the notion of reception: not just official interpretation, but also movement.

We hope that the pastoral letters which will tell us about the review of PCP II will help serve the movement of renewal because, in the end, that is more important—the movement, the conversion, the intellectual, moral, spiritual conversion brought about by a new way of looking at Church and a new way of looking at mission.

Points for Reflection

We have to be realistic in assessing PCP II and the Church in the Philippines after PCP II. We should avoid two extremes. One extreme is the position that says PCP II amounts to nothing. Immediately after PCP II, some theologians and pastors already declared that PCP II was only a big show, that it should be dismissed. They said that the following year we should call for PCP III because they considered PCP II obsolete from the beginning. I think some people
made such statements out of mistrust for anything conciliar and headed by bishops. Another extreme is for people to put so much burden on PCP II, wanting PCP II to accomplish a lot and appealing to PCP II for everything.

Yes, we have to admit that many good and significant things have happened to the Church after PCP II, but let us not be blind. In the ten years from 1991 up to 2001, it was not only PCP II that was the concern of the Church in the Philippines.

We had the Ramos presidency and for the first time the country elected a non-Catholic president. That was a big concern for the Church. In 1994 came Tertio Milenio Adveniente. In 1995, the Philippines hosted the World Youth Day and the 25th anniversary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. That took a lot of work. In 1997, the year of Jesus Christ. In 1998, the year of the Holy Spirit. In 1999, the year of the Father. In 2000, the Jubilee. If you count all that, a good seven years of the past decade were devoted to things not necessarily connected, at least explicitly, to PCP II.

By stretching our pastoral imagination, we may connect the year of the Father, the year of the Spirit, the year of Jesus Christ and the Jubilee to the themes of PCP II. But as an explicit theme, PCP II was literally buried this past decade under the preparations and concerns for the Jubilee. Therefore, we cannot totally blame the Church in the Philippines for forgetting PCP II. We also cannot blame PCP II for being ineffectual.

Still it is important to evaluate the reception of some specific points of PCP II. Using the framework of interpretation and movement, let us see how much the Church in the Philippines has been changed because it has received the themes of PCP II, not only on the official level of interpretation but as movement.

Let me point to this wonderful image of a community of disciples becoming the Church of the Poor. In fact, I would argue that if there is anything that would have the potential to be used as the interpretative key for the self-understanding of the Church in PCP II, it would be that of being Church of the Poor.
Unless the poor are included, we are not a full community. For as long as the poor are in the margins, we cannot be considered a community. The Church as full community needs to be Church for the Poor. If you re-read PCP II 122-136, you will still be moved by those wonderful paragraphs on being Church of the Poor.

Just dwell on that important aspect—there is no true community of disciples in the Church unless the Church in the Philippines becomes also a Church of the Poor. Not only a Church that cares for the poor, not only a Church that lives by evangelical poverty but a Church where the poor are the evangelizers, a Church where the poor feel at home, a Church where the poor are the center of gravity, a Church where the leaders are also poor because they will not vie for the highest honors or the best parishes or for titles, a Church where the poor will be the bearer of Good News for everyone including the leaders.

Now I suggest that you read that portion, i.e., PCP II 122-136, and then, using the framework of reception that I have given, ask yourself: How has the Church in the Philippines received that? Has the Church in the Philippines been transformed into the Church of the Poor envisioned by PCP II—both on the levels of official interpretation and as movement?

Let me express my opinion. On the level of official interpretation, just gauging the mindset of the Church after PCP II and using primarily the pastoral letters of the CBCP, we can say there is a definite movement towards being Church of the Poor. The pastoral letters of the bishops these past 10 years have been all pro-people, and most especially pro-poor.

How about on the level of movement? In matters of lifestyle, have we become poorer because of PCP II? For example, look at local communities, parishes, and gauge the involvement of the poor in pastoral councils. Are they really heard? Have they become the center of gravity for the Church? When we construct new churches, we want them to be durable, but will the poor and simple feel at home in them? Or will they think that they look like basura [trash] in
the nice church, feel embarrassed and say to themselves, “We better not enter.”

What bothers me is this—as I told you, the original PCP II came after EDSA. We will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of PCP II next week and another EDSA event is looming large before us. But I have also been quite disturbed since the start of this impeachment crisis. The painful question is: Where are the poor? Where are the poor?

Where are the simple people? How come there is a Mendiola and there is an EDSA? And what almost killed me was this—I very seldom watch TV but before New Year I was so tired and I just turned on the TV set and I saw a program—a review of the Erap presidency. Very beautifully done. What kept coming back, recurring, was the antiphon—“Ang pangulo ng maralita. Ang pangulo ng maralita. Ang pangulo ng maralita” [The President of the poor. The President of the poor. The President of the poor]. And very beautifully crafted.

I tried, very difficult, but I tried, to bracket off my biases and tried to be a tabula rasa, just an empty vessel. How would I be affected by the images? And I tell you, they were moving images. You would really be convinced that this man is the President of the poor. And there was no shame in saying that—“Ako ang Pangulo ng mga maralita” [I am the President of the poor]. Even the anchorwoman was so convincing. She was able to convey it beautifully, “Magpasalamat tayo sa pagtatapos ng taon. Biniyayaan tayo ng Diyos ng Pangulo ng maralita” [Let us give thanks for the ending of another year. God has blessed us with a President of the poor].

What bothered me was how come someone like him does not have any hesitation in claiming to be the President of the poor? Which bishop can claim to be the bishop of the poor? Which priest can stand up here and say, “Ako po’y pari ng maralita” [I am a priest of the poor]? Which diocese, in its report next week, can say, “Kami po ay Simbahan ng maralita” [We are a Church of the Poor]?

Someone told me that, most probably, it is not only the rhetoric of Erap—who is claiming the poor for himself—that is succeeding because, maybe, the absence of the simple and the poor in some of
the movements being initiated by the Church leaders is a silent protest against the Church. The poor know they have to protest against Erap but they are saying, “Look, why don’t we protest against you also.”

I remember a grandfather who, after a storm, brought his grandson to a church for baptism but was rejected by the pastor because they came three minutes late; so they had to come back the following week. Then this old man saw how the pastor conducted a special baptism for a group that came late in a number of cars. They explained that they were caught in traffic and the pastor suddenly understood, “Yes, I know how bad the traffic is. It’s not your fault that you’re late.” So he baptized the baby. This grandfather told me, “How come the priest understands those who are caught in traffic but the priest cannot understand those of us who have to walk?” Do you expect that man to believe our rhetoric about Church of the Poor?

I do not know what this new EDSA event will bring. But it is quite disturbing. Who will gather in EDSA? Who? Will it be the official interpreters? Will it be those whom PCP II proclaimed to be the center of gravity of the Church? At doon ho ako nagagalit. Parang ang galing-galing ng mga propagandista nitong si Erap. Talagang magaling kung papaano niyang nahati ang tao. Tapos yung sinabi ng Simbahan sa PCP II na walang epekto, sa kanyang ilang buwan pa lang ng propaganda, epektibong epektibo [And that is what makes me angry. It appears that Erap’s propagandists are more effective. In a few months, they helped him divide the people, whereas what PCP II proclaimed ten years ago has had no effect].

Another thing mentioned by PCP II concerns the Church and the political community (PCP II 330-347). The bishops of PCP II, speaking about renewed integral evangelization, called on the laity and the pastors to really collaborate—the pastors, especially through their teaching of moral principles, to help in the transformation of Philippine society; and the laity, especially through active involvement including partisan politics, to evangelize the secular world.

Now may I ask, of the eleven senators [who voted not to open
the second envelope at Erap’s impeachment trial], how many of them are Catholics? If we use them as the gauge of the success of PCP II, how will you grade PCP II? How will you grade the laity, especially those in partisan politics and their service in renewing society. Well, we can always excuse ourselves and say, “They were politicians even before PCP II.” Has anything changed?

In PCP II 627, the section on Catholic education states,

We must sadly admit, however, that many of the graduates of our schools, despite these distinct advantages of their schooling, do not seem to have sufficiently assimilated Christian values in such a way as to renew their Christian living.

Many graduates of Catholic schools have been successful economically and politically, but they have also contributed to the dismal economic and political imbalances existing in our country. Has the situation changed after ten years?

Can we put the blame on PCP II? Not really. We have to be realistic. The Philippine church has a lot of receiving and assimilating to do. Maybe we have hardly begun. But that has been the history of the Church. Reception, assimilation for renewal, usually takes time to take effect. It takes time for re-thinking. It takes time for conversion. It takes time for even the acceptance that we need to be renewed.

PCP II still has to be received and the context of the Philippine church and Philippine society has been shifting so fast. How can we continue receiving this renewal movement in constantly shifting contexts? Yes, there are a lot of valid things because what PCP II has to offer was already offered by Vatican II, but what we have to discern, most probably, is how to receive PCP II in our context and to identify areas of reception.

We are still in the process of receiving and we just pray that we will have the courage to receive PCP II fully. It would require a lot of dying to self. Is the Church in the Philippines willing to die in order to receive the new life that is being offered? For as long as we cling to what is convenient, to what is comfortable, to what we have been
used to, and we do not take the risk of dying, then renewal will never happen. We will be interpreting texts and we will be producing wonderful letters and decrees, but in terms of movement, we will still be inert.

Many of the changes in the Church have occurred because of Vatican II. What we are being asked in PCP II is to elaborate these changes locally in the situation of the Philippines, most especially in becoming the Church of the Poor and in being a leaven in the transformation of society. In receiving PCP II, let us begin with those who are formed in our own Catholic institutions.