THE CBCP PASTORAL EXHORTATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Following John Paul II's hopes for Church renewal presented in his Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines [CBCP] has issued a pastoral exhortation on the Christian Faith and Philippine culture, focused particularly on the key notion of "inculturation." This is a most welcome addition to the many official publications of the Philippine hierarchy relating directly to the ministry of catechesis or religious education in the Philippines.¹ Not only did the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) put great stress on catechesis in general, but it especially emphasized precisely the urgent need that this catechesis be "inculturated."²

¹ Significant official Church documents dealing with catechesis include *Matering in Christian Faith, the National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (NGCDP) in 1985; the English edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) in 1994, our own national *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (CFC), published in its Vatican approved final form in 1997; a *Companion to the CFC*, vol 1, 1998; and a *Summary of the CFC*, 1998. We now await the publication of the CFC in Tagalog and other Filipino languages. A Bicol translation of the *Summary of the CFC* has already been published with added local catechetical material. See Gilbert A. Garcia, H.P., *Catecismo para sa Filipino Catholics* [Naga City: Caceres Catechetical Ministry Publications, 1998].

² *The Acts and Doctrines of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* [PCP II] (Manila: Secretariat, 1992), calling for a renewed catechesis described as the "most basic area of renewal and the one that must receive first priority" (nos. 156-64, 183), and also for "inculturation" of catechesis (nos. 72, 160-62 and 210).
Significantly, in their exhortation, the bishops recognize the important progress that has already been made in the area of inculturated catechesis in the Philippine Church. They note that the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines "laid the groundwork... toward the creation of a more inculturated Church" by "its early acceptance of the need of a catechesis that paid full attention to Filipino social realities and culture." They go on to acknowledge the "outstandingly clear" thrust towards inculturation in the Catechism for Filipino Catholics (CFC), with "its efforts to teach the faith in a way that makes sense to our own mentality." (No. 44)

The purpose of this very modest study then is to offer some reflections on the CBCP exhortation relative to catechesis/religious education in the Philippines today. It will focus on some practical problems met in the actual exercise and pursuit of authentic catechetical inculturation. The perspective from which this study wishes to discuss the exhortation can perhaps best be described as "existential praxis,"3 or more simply, "from the level of experience."4 This commentary will be divided into three parts. First, inspired primarily by the first part of the pastoral exhortation, some observations on the way Filipino values and Christian faith are (or, perhaps better, are not) being interrelated in Philippine education today will be offered. Secondly, drawing on the second and third sections of the bishops' exhortation, certain tensions involved in the pursuit of inculturated religious education will be presented from the concrete experience of the production and approval of the Catechism for Filipino Catholics. Finally, an ongoing challenge to inculturated religious education will be discussed.

**Philippine Cultural Values and Religious Education**

From many different aspects, the exhortation provides an extremely

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3 This is the expression used by Thomas Groome in his "Inculturation: How to Proceed in a Pastoral Context," in *Christianity and Cultures*, ed. N. Greinacher and N. Mette, *Concilium* 1994/2, 120-33, at 120

helpful overview for the formation of catechists. The Bishops’ document presents a clear exposition of the notion of culture with the interaction of structures and behavior; it focuses on the “inner part” of culture (thinking, believing, symbolizing, valuing) summarized under the rubric of values. This is then applied to both traditional and emergent Filipino values and includes an evaluation of their excesses and incompatibilities. This presentation comprises more than one third of the entire exhortation.

 Particularly helpful for moral catechesis is the section on the often excessive Filipino emphasis on interpersonal relationships, and the consequent tendency to view all rules and regulations as negotiable and open to bargaining (No. 27). Also relevant is the mention of a certain weakness and ambivalence in value commitment, for example, regarding social justice (No. 33).

 What is perhaps more pertinent, however, to our actual educational situation is the perception of the basic relationship between Christian faith and Filipino values. The bishops recognize that some Filipino values involve “high human ideals,” and, as such, are “seeds of the Gospel”; they also point out that some of these cultural values involve “excesses and defects” that must be corrected (No. 70). The point however, is that the bishops insist on the necessity of bringing into creative inter-action the values of our people and Christian faith: “our task,” they write, “is to make our cultural values become ever more attuned and configured with those of the Gospel.” (No. 70.4)

 This attitude is in stark contrast to a disturbing situation in Philippine education today. On the one hand, government initiated programs insist on formation in Filipino values, but apparently see no significant connection between these values and Christian faith. On the other hand, religious educators for their part teach the Christian faith, but with insufficient ability to show the profound links between this faith and operative Filipino values.

 Somehow or other, in professional educational circles, “values” and
"Christian faith-life" have not been viewed together. One clear example of this was the original government-instituted program of "Value Education" which listed twenty-four Filipino values of which the last (and apparently least!) was "relation to the Transcendent." This followed "proper table etiquette at meals," and apparently had nothing to do with the other twenty-three Filipino values! At about the same time, a "Moral Recovery Program: Building a People — Building a Nation," was submitted to the Senate; it was completely lacking in any explicit input from Christian Faith.

Both official public programs were completely fashioned according to professional social science norms and methodologies. Even though the government's value education program has been substantially modified, there remains a serious tension in many elementary and secondary level Catholic schools regarding the relation between the "value education program" and their religious education. From the many inquiries from Catholic schools throughout the land, received by the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE), there does not seem to be any firm consensus regarding the inter-relation between the value education and religion programs of Catholic schools.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the major problem in the actual current exercise of catechesis and religious education is the inability of most catechists/religious educators to "teach in terms of their own lives... [They are not] trained in giving concrete, specific examples from the experience they share with those they catechize —

5 A surprising factor was the placid reaction to this presentation on the part of the Catholic educators present at the international symposium which launched the government's values education program. No one addressed the direct impact of Christian Faith on moral values in Filipino culture.


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examples drawn from their own lives, families, communities. There exists a serious gap between the theory of “experiential catechesis” and the actual practice. Put bluntly, the average catechist/religion teacher has never been adequately formed in the practical skill of using their experience in the “instruction in the faith.” Although in catechist formation programs, catechists are trained in effective use of the three basic sources of catechesis, namely Scripture, Church teaching and human experience, the greatest difficulty seems to be met in the effective use of the “experience source.” This is painfully confirmed by the consistent and strong complaint of the catechized and religion students: “Why is ‘religion’ so impractical and irrelevant to our daily lives?”

What is urgently needed, then, is to form in the catechist/religion teacher the ability to bring the catechized or religion students to a personal recognition and appreciation of the Christian values inherent in ordinary Filipino life. The CBCP’s exhortation can offer real help in forming catechists who can bring out the intrinsic link between Filipino values and Catholic Faith in a clear, reasonable manner.

The creative tensions of inculturation and the CFC

Paradigm for Inculturation. The most captivating section of the exhortation for the religious educator is the exposition of the “primary paradigm of inculturation” as “the mystery of the incarnation understood in its totality, comprising firstly, Incarnation; secondly, Cross-and-Resurrection (Paschal Mystery); and thirdly, Pentecost” (No. 59). Although only the first stage, Incarnation, is explained in any detail (Nos. 60-65), the other two can be developed

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7 NCDP no. 167.

in future works. What is so attractive for the religious educator is the simplicity of the paradigm and its openness to direct relation with the liturgy. It may also provide a way of preparing for the millennium that is both distinct yet intrinsically related to John Paul II’s Trinitarian approach in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.

Besides these last two mentioned benefits, however, one might add that the inclusion of the stages of “Cross-and-Resurrection” and “Pentecost,” along with the more familiar stage of “Incarnation,” in the bishops’ paradigm, highlights the fact that the process of inculturation involves certain tensions — hopefully fruitful, in the long run, but tensions nonetheless. The stage of “cross-and-resurrection” involves a certain tension or dialectic between Christian faith and the receiving culture, both of which must undergo a dynamic of “dying-and-rising” in their interaction with one another. The stage of “Pentecost” involves a tension or dialectic between the particularity of the local, inculturated Church and the Universal church, the Catholic *unitas*, to which it belongs. The point is: concrete attempts to inculturate catechesis or religious education will involve these tensions. The reception of the CFC both prior to and after its official Vatican approval clearly illustrates the reality of these tensions.

**The tension between the particularity of the local Church and unity with the universal Church.** Let us take the second tension first. According to the pastoral exhortation, the stage of “Pentecost” affirms that the “the final objective of inculturation [is] a communion of Churches within a communion of peoples.” (No. 54) “The process of inculturation,” we are reminded, “is not an end in itself, but precisely a call to realizing the catholicity of the *una sancta* . . .” (No. 69) These words are an important reminder that the unity of all local churches in the universal Church is the goal of inculturation. There is a necessary caution involved here, since experience has uncovered the “risks” in inculturation.⁹ Serious questions arise concerning the tendency to-

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ward relativism or a pluralism that strains the unity of faith. Nevertheless, the document's discussion of the stage of "Pentecost" also makes clear that that this unity is one in which particularities of cultures remain operative. One might put it thus: what is aimed at is unity rather than uniformity, a unity open to diversity and achieved through complementarity. Images of this complementarity can be drawn from both everyday life (a choir, rainbow, the Olympics) and Scripture (the four Gospels, Pauline theology of the Church as Body, the Church at Pentecost, the variety of the saints).

The attempt to provide the Philippine Church with an inculturated catechism involved a somewhat painful experience of the reality of this tension. In August, 1996, a second series of criticisms of the CFC was received from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). A fundamental demand was made that the CFC present pure Catholic doctrine, untouched by any influence from Filipino culture or catechetical principles. Clearly, the CDF had a legitimate concern that Philippine religious education maintain unity in the faith with the universal Church; unfortunately, it apparently understood this unity in terms of uniformity, forgetting that, as a matter of fact, Christian Faith has never existed in a pure non-inculturated state. As the bishops put it, "there is no pure 'essence of Christianity' existing in an abstract state, waiting as it were to be applied" (No. 53).

This demand on the part of the CDF was successfully rejected by CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE). In its reply, ECCCE pointed out that this demand contradicted the explicit description of the nature of "national catechisms"

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(i.e., a "national catechism" as presenting "Catholic doctrine expressed intelligibly within the national cultural context") as proposed by Vatican documents. The Congregation for the Clergy sided with ECCCE's stand, and the CDF demand was quietly dropped.

The official approval of the CFC by the Vatican hopefully represents a recognition that the CFC has successfully achieved a presentation of Christian faith that is rooted in the particularity of its cultural context yet maintains unity in the faith with the universal Church.

The dialectic of faith and culture. A recent review of the CFC after its Vatican approval indicates a second tension involved in the concrete process of inculturating religious education and catechesis. On the one hand, the review seriously questioned whether CFC's summaries of official Church teaching should be necessary in a catechism addressed primarily to committed Catholics. It feared that for "the average Filipino Catholic, the reading of these items of theological information will lead to incomprehension and frustration." On the other hand, the review was also apparently not happy with the CFC's exposition in seven different chapters of Mary's relation to Catholic Filipinos, as model of Faith, as mother of Jesus, as mother of the Church, as characteristic of Filipino devotions, and as model of the new Creation. The reviewer complains of the confusion caused by such a "superabundance of titles"—despite the fact that this Marian "excess," if one were to call it that, is the cultural-pastoral reality, is part and parcel of the pastoral scene. The titles are actual and operative in contemporary Filipino religiosity, and are not going to go away or made to disappear by any wishful thinking of systematic theologians or liturgists.


13 For CFC's exposition on Mary, see chaps. 1 on Filipino Catholics (#45-48); 3 on Faith (#155-59); 8 on Original Sin (#394-95); 10 on Jesus (#513-26, 545-49); 22 on the Holy Spirit (#1291-92); 23 on the Church (#1431-41, 1464-65); 24 on Prayer & Devotions (#1537-52, 1580-83); 29 on Resurrection (#2080).
These criticisms, moving in seemingly opposite directions, indicate the reality of the second tension involved in the concrete exercise of inculcutating religious education. As the CBCP exhortation insists "inculturation involves a process of interface and interaction between faith and culture" (No. 55).

It is perhaps a back-handed compliment that the CFC should be faulted for giving serious attention to both Filipino religiosity (which the bishops point to approvingly as evidence that "enough integration of our faith and our culture has taken place" [No. 70]) and to the official teaching of the Church teaching which is surely included in "faith." After all, on the one hand, the CFC was written precisely to offer accurate summaries of official Church teaching, presented within the Philippine context. The idea of reserving official Church teaching proclaimed by Church Councils only to professional theologians seems to contradict the basic purpose of Church teaching. Filipino catechists really want to know "what the Church teaches." The Conciliar teaching on the essentials of the Faith is often clearer and more helpful to the great majority of Filipinos engaged in the catechetical and religious educational ministry than are most of the current expositions proposed by contemporary theologians or theological schools.

At the same time, the CFC was written with the conviction that popular religiosity, such as Filipino Marian piety, can be a positive force in the effort toward "Maturing in Christian Faith" and in the "new evangelization." The CFC's position, following the NCDP, is that a multiple approach, from various starting points, is both more actual and realistic. This is the reality of our Philippine catechetical

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14 The CBCP's exhortation on Philippine culture does not directly provide norms regarding how much doctrinal content is needed for an inculcutated catechesis. Yet, by developing at length the wide range of traditional and emergent Filipino values (including their many complex excesses and incompatibilities), the exhortation points to the actual need for a fundamental grasp of a wide array of Christian truths, values and attitudes.

15 Years ago, during the process of composing the NCDP, Fr. Hermann Hendricks CICM posed a similar question regarding the inclusion of "Co-redemptrix" and "Mediatrix" in the text (NCDP #242). The response was simply that such titles are in common use, and simply ignoring them is not pastorally adequate. Perhaps this was what motivated Vatican II to do the same in its "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," no. 62.
scene, and it appears more fruitful pastorally. If a certain "purification" of Marian devotions is desired to make them more "scripturally grounded, and oriented toward Christ and to the building up of the local Christian communities," such a work has to start from "where things are," not just from some proposed ideal. Thus the CFC's exposition is eminently pastoral, responding to the need to educate our catechists in correcting erroneous notions that Filipino Catholics "worship" Mary, or put Mary above Christ — charges which PCP II itself addressed.17

To conclude this section: a certain number of principles operative in the CFC's efforts at an inculturated presentation of the faith have surfaced: first, the "Reality Principle" of starting with "what is"; second, the positive yet critical appreciation of Catholic Tradition, including the Creed and Conciliar teaching, and Tradition's enduring value in its creative dialogue with different cultures in the ongoing process of inculturation. In short, a respect for the creative dialectic between faith and culture which is intrinsic to the process of inculturated religious education.

The continuing challenge of "mutual transformation"

In its section on "Inculturation and the Local Church," the CBCP exhortation emphasizes the fact that inculturation is a constructive process, never a once-and-for-all reality. The exhortation mentions two stages of the process: "entrance into" or "conversation with" culture, and "mutual exchange" and "transformation" of culture (No. 50) What is clear is that authentic inculturation cannot be reduced simply to the first stage of "entrance" (or "adaptation").18

The exhortation is equally clear, however, that the transformation

16 NCDP 249, no.10, 134.

17 PCP II nos. 157, 174; and Decree 18, no.3.

involved in the second stage must be mutual. It emphasizes the fact that inculturation does not mean setting faith and culture side-by-side, but rather always involves a process of interface and interaction between the two, an interaction that will necessarily bring about transformation — a mutual transformation. Aspects and elements of the “inculturated Christianity” which is now in interaction with a local culture will have to yield place to other expressions of Christian faith and life which come from the local culture, and aspects and elements of the local culture which are incompatible with Christian faith and life must yield to the meanings and values of the Gospel and Christian life. (No. 56)

This point of mutual transformation will pose serious problems in the years to come for catechetical and religious education leaders. To what extent local Philippine culture and the dialogue with Asian religious traditions will be allowed to “transform” catechetical instruction in the Faith based on the traditional “four pillars” (Creed, Sacraments, Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer)\(^{19}\) remains to be seen. Most probably the practical operative solution will come about through the persevering efforts of a discerning and engaged local Church, as described in the final section of the exhortation (No. 70).

**Conclusion**

In the end, from a religious education perspective, this latest CBCP exhortation can be interpreted as a call to renewed efforts in carrying forward the essentially on-going process of inculturating the Catholic Faith in authentic Filipino culture. The exhortation is, on the whole, however, rightfully optimistic. While there is “much more that can be done and has to be done,” — Take Courage! — “There is a truly Filipino Church ...a real wedding of faith and culture” (No. 70).

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\(^{19}\)See John Paul II’s “Fidei Depositum,” which in introducing the *CCC* describes its four parts as drawn from the traditional order already followed in St. Pius V’s catechism, and which are called “four pillars of catechesis” in *CCC* no. 13, and in the new *GDC* no. 122.