EMERGING GLOBAL, POSTMODERN CULTURE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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A recent trip to Northern Mindanao, where I lived and worked almost two decades ago, left me with some contrasting images that depict, to me, the transitional state of Philippine culture. On the one hand, the quiet, primarily agricultural towns of Agusan del Sur and Misamis Oriental, seemed virtually unchanged. On the other hand, Cagayan de Oro City, just west of Agusan del Sur, now boasts of large new malls and an Internet Café on practically every street corner; and in the quiet district of Impalambong, Malaybalay, Bukidnon, I vividly recall a group of six children, sprawled in front of a TV set one evening, mesmerized by Cable TV.

These images illustrate the process of significant and rapid change Philippine culture is undergoing, a process that is insufficiently considered, to my mind, in the otherwise excellent Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines.

In saying this, I do not deny, of course, the continuing validity and helpfulness of the cultural analysis and theological and pastoral reflections offered by the bishops. For example, the description of the negative aspects of Philippine culture in the masterful first section of the
document, the analysis of the excessive personalism of the culture, with its operative values of *pakikisama, biya, and utang ng loob*, remains painfully accurate and relevant. More theologically, the second section's presentation of inculturation in terms of the "mystery of the Incarnation in its totality" (comprising Incarnation, Cross-and-Resurrection, and Pentecost) nicely summarizes three important aspects of inculturation: first, inculturation as the *expression* of the gospel in the elements of a culture; secondly, inculturation as the *transformation* of a culture through a purifying encounter with the Gospel; thirdly, inculturation as directed towards the realization of the concrete catholicity of the universal church.

This having been said, however, it nevertheless seems that the Pastoral Exhortation pays insufficient attention to the fact that, in the past decade or so, Philippine culture has been transformed, and is still being significantly altered, by the processes of globalization and urbanization. This lacuna is particularly unfortunate when one remembers that the aim of the bishops in its end-of-the century series of Pastoral Exhortations is precisely the articulation of orientations for evangelization and pastoral action for the new world of the third Christian millennium.

This brief comment then seeks to supplement the observations and recommendations of the bishops in their Pastoral Exhortation. After a short description of globalization and urbanization, the paper will discuss three new elements introduced into the culture by these processes. Some consequences of these new cultural elements will be noted, and some directions for the Philippine Church in view of these changes, suggested.

**Globalization and urbanization**

"Urbanization" refers simply to the fact that the once predominantly agricultural population of the Philippines is becoming an increasingly urban population.¹ "Globalization" refers to that complex

¹Significantly, "galloping urbanization" is the first of the new "challenges and opportunities" described by a recent and important document from the Pontifical Council for Cul-
phenomenon by which the hard boundaries which divided nations and cultures from each other have been eroded by the essentially unchallenged international regime of neo-liberal economics, on the one hand, and the unprecedented developments in communications and information technologies, on the other. One can describe the changes wrought in the Philippine situation by these processes quite graphically. In the past decade, one can fairly say that the country has "transitioned" from "snail-mail" to email; from books to the Internet; from radio to cable TV (available even in the most remote barrios of Mindanao); from sari-sari stores to malls; from farms to "techno" and industrial parks; from barrios to cities.

Three new cultural elements

These cultural and societal changes have resulted in at least three relatively novel cultural elements that challenge the once monolithically Catholic traditional rural Philippine culture. The first novum is the experience of pluralism, the expansion of the range of choices of being and doing available in the culture. It is surely not insignificant that the great icons of the new global urban culture, the Internet, Cable TV and the Mall, are all characterized by pluralism; all afford the individual a dizzying multiplicity of choices. This "new" pluralism, of course, carries with it certain positive elements. The expansion of the range of freedom is, to some extent, itself liberating. Too, the "new" pluralism has allowed the emergence of repressed voices of the "Other," those "different" from the dominant majority of traditional culture, whose "differentness" often appeared threatening to the hegemony of the dominant majority: the voices, for example, of women, indigenous peoples and minority ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese Filipinos), "gays."

ture: "Under various pressures, such as poverty and the underdevelopment of rural areas ... the growing number of people on the move is emptying the countryside of people and causing the great cities to expand excessively." (Pontifical Council for Culture, Towards a Pasto- toral Approach to Culture [Vatican City, published June 9, 1999], No. 8)

 Nevertheless, the “new” experience of pluralism can be more ambiguous when coupled with a second element brought about by globalization and urbanization: namely, the “extension of modernity,” particularly, modernity’s individualistic sense of the self as “unencumbered” or completely autonomous. Many Filipinos have handled the “new pluralism” by adopting, often uncritically, modernity’s sense of the self as one who is free to decide for himself or herself what is true and good, as long as these choices don’t harm anyone else. The strains of this thinking are immediately detectable by anyone exposed to Philippine popular media, to radio and TV talk shows, to tabloids, and the like.

A third and final novum emerging in the culture is the experience, among many, of postmodern fragmentation. Disoriented by so many choices, a disorientation abetted by the sense of self of modernity, what is arising, especially among the young — the so-called “Generation X” — is a sense of centerless pluralism. In a recent pastoral letter, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan described postmodern Western

3 Cf. Ibid., 9-11. On page 9, among the “negative” aspects of modernity, Schreiter includes “the erosion or relativization of values, and an anomie individualism.”

Modernity, broadly taken to mean the culture brought about by the “Enlightenment,” can, in fact, be seen as the result of Western culture’s negotiations with the reality of pluralism, particularly religious pluralism. Exhausted by the seemingly endless European religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, Enlightenment thinkers offered a two-fold solution: first, the privileging of “universal reason” as the common “language” available to all right-thinking people, regardless of religion; and secondly, the privatization of the religious and the ethical, the relegation of the questions of truth in religion, and goodness or evil in morality to the individual’s free, private choice. For an intellectual history of the culture of modernity, see Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).


5 Cf. Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 19: “... in an important sense the postmodern ethos is centerlessness. No clear shared focus unites the diverse and divergent elements of postmodern society into a single whole. There are no longer any common standards to which people can appeal in their effort to measure, judge, or value ideas, opinions, or lifestyle choices.” In a similar vein, the Pontifical Council for Culture speaks of the “cultural rootlessness” and “cultural fragmentation” which are often the results of “galloping urbanization” (*Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, No. 8).
culture as "fatherless." I understand him to mean that contemporary Western culture, with its absence of substantive common values and meanings, or a common story or "meta-narrative," lacks that unifying sense of origin, telos, and "home," conveyed in the image of the "father." I don't think one is being needlessly alarmist in noting the development of a similar "fatherlessness" in the emerging Philippine version of global, postmodern culture. Those who work with the young, in basic education or religious formation, for example, would be able, I am convinced, to give experiential validation of this sense of aimless relativism and fragmented pluralism.7

Consequences

What are some consequences of this sense of a "centerless pluralism" emerging in Philippine culture? In the '70's and '80's, various ideologies of social change provided a convincing "meta-story" that helped integrate the experience of plurality and galvanize the energies of individuals. In the emerging "centerless" pluralism of today, it seems to me that energy is deflected to two more ephemeral passions: possession and consumption.8 If there is nothing large enough to integrate everything, nothing worth staking one's life on, then more immediate goals of owning more and enjoying more become compelling. It is not surprising, then, that two of the most prevalent cultural pre-occupa-

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7 A manifestation, for example, of this fragmentation, is the phenomenon of the existence of "multiple selves" in a given individual. Reflecting the "uncentered" and fragmented state of culture; mimicking the Internet with its unintegrated variety of websites or Cable TV with its uncoordinated variety of channels, some young people manifest, it has been observed, a similarly unintegrated plurality of "selves" or personas, easily assumed or discarded in different situations. Cf. the interesting articles around the theme of "The question of identity" in Echoes (Winter 1998), a publication of The Post-modernity Project of the University of Virginia.

8 Paul Lakeland describes the intense desire to possess in the midst of the absence of ultimate goals and meanings very simply: "The postmodern human being wants a lot but expects little." Paul Lakeland, Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 8.
tions of many Filipinos at the end of the millennium are the mall and the "TF" or "titillating [sex] film." Meanwhile, not only are truth and God forgotten by this focus on the satisfaction of the relatively superficial longings of having and enjoying, but so is the "suffering other." The German theologian Dorothee Soelle poignantly but, I think, accurately, describes the culture created by globalization and urbanization as a large supermarket, where people, seemingly absorbed yet deeply distracted within, run up and down the aisles choosing things, while "death and alienation have the run of the place."9

On the other hand, it does seem too that the sense of disorientation and fragmentation in the culture has not only pushed people to the "alienated immediacy of consumer existence,"10 but has also given rise, among some, to a new spiritual hunger and searching for "wholeness."11 Evidence of this spiritual searching can be discerned in the present popularity of both Christian transparochial "covenant communities" and non- or post-Christian "new age" movements12—both groupings having in common, significantly, a search for spiritual fulfillment outside traditional Catholic parish or diocesan structures. This latter observation suggests — uncomfortably, of course — that as they stand today, traditional Church structures, institutions, forms of community life, teaching and worship, are not perceived as responding adequately to the postmodern Filipino's search for "spiritual life and experience."

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9 Quoted in Lakeland, Postmodernity, 11.


11 For a thoughtful reflection on the possibilities of both "superficially lived postmodernity" which focuses on possession and consumption, and "creative postmodernity" which engages in a new spiritual searching, see Gallagher, Clashung Symbols, especially chapter eight, entitled "The Postmodern Situation — Friend or Foe?" 87-100.

12 See Lode L. Wostyn, CICM, A New Church for a New Age: A Study of the Challenges Posed to the Church by the New Age Movements (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), especially 131-55.
Reflections on the role of the Church

If what has been suggested above rings even faintly true, then certain directions seem indicated for the Philippine Church, in addition to those listed in Part Three of the CBCP exhortation. I will briefly and somewhat arbitrarily point out four such pastoral directions or imperatives.

First is the need for more serious cultural analysis and discernment of the emerging global, postmodern Philippine culture. The Church must try to understand the rising new culture more deeply, through a deeper immersion in the worlds of those most affected by it (the young ["Generation X"], young urban professionals, and newly urbanized populations) and through serious interdisciplinary cultural analysis. Along with a more adequate cultural analysis, however, the Church should engage in serious "cultural discernment," a "specifically spiritual and Christian way of reading reality"\(^{13}\) which traces the trajectories of "consolation" and "desolation" (understood in the Ignatian sense of the words) in the emerging global culture.\(^{14}\) Furthermore, those training for any form of pastoral ministry should study the fruits of this cultural analysis and discernment more systematically. In the '70's and '80's, seminars in structural and political analysis were the necessary "consciousness-raising" instruments that allowed pastoral ministers and Christians in general to respond more adequately to the social problematic. It would seem that ministers and Christians of the new millennium need similar instruments to bring the new cultural situation to the level of conscious reflection and planning.

Secondly, "transparochial communities" with their strong "counter-cultural" ethos should be more seriously reflected on and appreciated, rather than simply dismissed as elitist and non-cooperative by parish priests or as "fundamentalist" by some theologians.\(^{15}\) After all, in their

\(^{13}\) Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 122.

\(^{14}\) "Cultural discernment" in the sense described above is well discussed by Gallagher in *Clashing Symbols*, 111-24.

\(^{15}\) For an example of an *appreciative* theologico-pastoral evaluation, see Peter Hocken, "The Challenge of New Movements," *Priests and People* 13 (February 1999): 59-62.
pastoral exhortation, the bishops recognize that "the best vehicle available" for the work of cultural discernment is the "basic ecclesial community or BEC or at least a BEC-type Church or organization, society, movement, etc." (Part III, no. 8 — emphasis added) — surely a description that fits most "covenant communities," although they are generally not territorial as parish-based BEC's are. Furthermore, as I suggested earlier, it seems to me that the rise of many new lay movements, charismatic or covenant communities, is somehow related to a growing sense of cultural disorientation and fragmentation. At the very least, the phenomenal appeal of these communities should raise questions as to what features of their life and practice respond to the cultural experience of urban, postmodern Filipinos in a way that more traditional institutional realizations of the Church apparently do not.

Third, the rising global culture suggests a revision in the "teaching style" of the magisterium. In the past two years, we have witnessed, I believe, three major "magisterial failures," that is, occasions when the clear teaching of the bishops was largely ignored or rejected by the Filipino Catholic population. I refer to the election of Joseph Estrada as president of the Philippines last year (had the CBCP guidelines for choosing a president been followed, it is unlikely that Estrada would have been elected!); the rejection by the populace at large of the bishops' opposition to the death penalty in the case of Leo Echegaray; and most recently, the Senate's disregard of the bishops' position against the Visiting Forces Agreement. While a multiplicity of factors was, no doubt, at work, in these cases, there is, I am convinced, a connection between the bishops' disregarded voice and the pluralistic, individualistic, fragmented culture arising in the country.

As Joseph Komonchak has pointed out, the Church's teaching authority, no matter how sacred its origins, nonetheless depends for its effectivity on "the community of interest and concern" uniting the teachers and the taught.\(^\text{16}\) In the emerging pluralistic and fragmented


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state of Philippine culture, one doubts whether one can simply presume a "community of interest and concern," a common sense of meanings and values, uniting the bishops and the people. If this is the case, then one should not expect the Filipino faithful to be led by their bishops, as in the past, simply by authoritative pronouncements on the part of the latter. The plurality of "voices of authority" in global urban culture calls for less of the accustomed reliance on the Church's cultural authority, and for more "proactive" attempts at persuasive, "promotional" discourse on the part of the bishops.

**Evangelization in the "key of beauty"**

Finally, how does one invite to faith in the Good News those who are affected by the individualistic and relativistic ethos of the rising global, postmodern culture? Two distinct voices suggest to me a general trajectory for evangelization.

The first voice is that of the Asian bishops, reported by Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-Hsi, *rapporteur general* of last year's Special Synod for Asia:

> All the Synod Fathers agreed that there must be a new way of presenting Jesus Christ to the peoples of Asia. *It is the person of Jesus Christ who needs to be presented and not doctrines about him.*

The second voice is that of a young American woman, a self-professed member of the so-called "Generation X":

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17 Avery Dulles describes the "promotional" as one of the essential functions of the magisterium: "The magisterial performance of a pope or bishop is not to be judged simply in terms of what he personally understands and says, but even more importantly in terms of his ability to structure a process in which others, including those without hierarchical mission, can successfully communicate, explain, and defend the Christian faith." Dulles, *A Church to Believe In* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 123.

Then, of course, there is the matter of telling us that the Church possesses the Absolute Truth. Gen Xers doubt the very existence of such Truth with a capital T... So you’re in quite a pickle: you can’t tell us the Church has “the Truth”... what do you have left to persuade us? One thing: the story. We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas. ... [and] we’re looking for the one story with staying power, the destruction and redemption of our lives. That’s to your advantage: you have the best redemption story on the market. Perhaps the only thing you can do, then, is to point towards Golgotha, a story that we can make sense of... A story needs a storyteller, and it is the Church alone that tells the story of salvation.19

These two apparently disparate voices — the elders of Asia, on the one hand, and a young woman of the West, on the other — come together, I believe, to suggest a common point: that evangelization in today’s cultural milieu should place emphasis on the “person” and the “story” of Jesus, rather than on “doctrines” or “the Truth.” One might put the essential point somewhat more abstractly thus: if the very notion of Truth “with a capital T” is problematic for the emergent culture, then perhaps the Church of the Philippines of the new millennium should evangelize, stressing, not so much the note of Truth, but that of Beauty (which, as Hans Urs Von Balthasar insists, are, after all, intrinsically connected aspects of being20).

Let me attempt a brief explanation. In global, postmodern culture, which questions the very existence of “Absolute and Universal Truths,” a strategy focused on “indoctrination,” stressing, arguing for, “proving” and defending the truth and the “correctness” of doctrines would


20 In his Theologik, Balthasar writes: “Truth, goodness and beauty are transcendental attributes of being, so much so that they can only be understood in one another and through one another.” Quoted by John Sward in The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 25.

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probably be ineffective. Perhaps, then, what should instead be emphasized are modes of communication of the Gospel that one might call *epiphanic* rather than argumentative or didactic: not so much clever marketing techniques that make the Gospel *appear* attractive, but rather, modes of communication which allow the inherent beauty — the *claritas* or radiance, the *consonantia* or harmony, the *integritas* or wholeness 21 — of the Gospel to shine forth, and to attract and draw people’s hearts to the acceptance of faith. After all, is not beauty well defined (in a maxim the provenance of which I can no longer trace) as *splendor veritatis rapiens mens ad assensum* — “the radiance of truth seducing the mind to assent”?

Both the Asian bishops and Ms. Hinlucky recognize that the heart of the beauty of Gospel is the person of the Crucified-and-Risen One. Both seem convinced that, presented epiphanically — through story, witness, liturgy and community life evoking religious experience — the person and the story of, more than doctrines about, Jesus, can draw the disoriented, searching postmodern Asian and Filipino, because of a beauty that harmonizes and “centers” the disparate, fragmented pieces of life, culture, suffering, death, and, in the end, offers hope. Perhaps it is ultimately the beauty, the *splendor veritatis* of this person and his story of God’s self-outpouring love, allowed to shine forth by those who believe, that will win friends for the Gospel in our new global, postmodern culture.

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21 These are, for Thomas Aquinas, the three qualities of beauty. See Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty*, 43.