TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE SPIRITUALITY
IN BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

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Spirituality

What drives us to do what we do, to be what we are? What makes us change or not change, go in one direction rather than in another when faced with choices that must be made? What motivates us to act as we do in daily life? The answer is our spirituality – the spirit within, the fire in our belly, the “heart within the heart” that roots our basic perspectives, our underlying attitudes, the choices we make day by day.

For Christians, core perspectives and daily decision making are directed by personal and communal faith in Jesus the Nazarene. Spirituality is expressed in our particular appropriation of Gospel values and the Catholic tradition, the manner in which God’s love inspires us to love God and one another (Mrk 12:28-31; Matt 22:34-40; Lk 10:25-28; also Jn 13:34-35; 1 Jn 4:11-16). The question that arises is: what spiritualities are being nurtured by Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)?

While faith is a key source, basic perspectives and daily choices also take us to the core of our culture, to cultural meaning, values, convictions, that which gives us a particular cultural identity, that which forms our relationships with one another, with others, with the surrounding world. Worldview and world ethos demarcate all that is good and valuable, all that we feel the need to nurture in a particular culture. Hence cultural values are closely interwoven with our spirituality.

Caution is needed. The Indonesian Bishops once declared that “the deepest root of our political problems is that faith is no longer the source of inspiration for daily life.” The link between spirituality and daily life is not always obvious or healthy. In rapidly changing societies, religion may well become a social identity marker, demarcating one group over against another, and be seen as primarily a matter of ritual observance detached from any ethical stance.

And so this essay looks at the ways spirituality impacts upon the individual, the family and the common life of Basic Ecclesial Communities, the ways BEC members respond to their environment. For this we need to look at the ways faith and spirituality influence cultural values, stimulate responses to unjust social situations, and guide relations with people of other faith

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traditions. Spirituality in BECs also involves looking at the way the Bible is read, and at the role popular devotions and liturgy play. All these compete in forming attitudes and actions in daily life, in shaping the spirituality by which we live.

Cultural Values and Spirituality

Cultural Values
The majority of Asian, African and Oceanic Christians come from nations and ethnic groups that enjoy indigenous cultures. While many indigenous cultural domains belong to small ethnic groups, some, such as in Nigeria, belong to large nations. Each is culturally unique, and yet there are a number of similar key values, mutatis mutandis, found in each cultural domain. This essay reflects experience with spiritualities in the cultures of eastern Indonesia.

To appreciate the spirituality of BECs, we need to understand the way culture channels and influences our thought processes along certain lines. We are formed by our cultural environment and at the same time are active agents of cultural change. The globalisation of economics and communication systems is not simply dissolving local cultural ways of thinking.

In indigenous cultures, the extended family forms the matrix that holds all key societal values together, such as clan-based order, respect for old age, the authority of elders, their love and concern for children, the obedience, respect, and gratitude owed to parents on the part of children, family solidarity, the paramount good of the family, care for its good name, its prestige and honour. From this matrix springs the cultural values of hospitality, the welfare of the immediate community, good relations with non-family members, social harmony, and accord with nature. Each value that makes cultures indigenous flows from the heart of society, from the extended family. Family values help to sustain the family spiritually and materially. All this is positive and in such societies, BECs usually form closely bound communities. However, where there is a weak sense of citizenship and the common good, family values can engender systemic corruption. For in indigenous societies, the family comes first. In which case, what impact is being made by the presence of BECs?

BECs can and do open up horizons and prompt concern beyond the family. For while an “ethnic spirituality” would confine the Gospel within tightly defined family concerns, a Gospel spirituality redraws each and every relationship, both local and global, as between brothers and sisters. The ideal is extreme: “love your enemies ... If you love only those who love you what reward will you get? Even the tax collectors do as much.” (Mt 5:44, 46) BECs in town, whose members come from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds, are more open to this Gospel spirituality, than are village BECs, which by their very location, may well consist of members of a single extended family.

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3 This section on cultural values is indebted to the life-time engagement of Bishop Francisco Claver (1926-2010) whose participative pastoral vision inspired the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences for 40 years. See his “final testament” in, The Making of a Local Church (Quezon City: Claretian Publications 2009), in particular Chapter 9, “The Spirituality of Discerning Communities”, 151-170.

4 I am in no way intimating that indigenous societies are more corrupt than the non-indigenous; the financial and banking crises of 2010 are sufficient proof of that. Nevertheless, cultural values are ambivalent: immensely good and yet open to distortion in rapidly changing social environments.
Local Values, Global Values

In the age of the hand phone and internet, nowhere is isolated, everywhere is influenced by global trends and values. In fact traditional family values have long intermingled with “modern” values such as individualism, personal initiative, and achieved rather than proscribed social status. Indigenous societies have also long been part of nation states which formally accept political participation and the legal equality of citizens. Many countries have legislated on gender equality and domestic violence.5

The encroachment of the acquisitive global market, with the mass migration it has generated, has led to a clash between traditional family values and modern commercial values. Often enough they lie un-integrated, whereby clan values remain strong in the family sphere (at birth, marriage, death/inheritance), while market values are increasingly decisive in the workplace. This clash often leads to indigenous societies being pushed to one side as their ancestral lands with their vast natural resources are taken over by outsiders driven by the acquisitive values of the market. What is the role of the BEC in this scenario?

In BECs and faith-based social movements, biblical spirituality can integrate the values of the extended family with modern values such as personal freedom, participation, individual initiative and achievement. Christian spirituality can and should encourage support for social and gender equality, active participation in social issues, non-violence as both ethos and strategy, and honesty and transparency in personal and commercial relationships. As Francisco Claver puts it, “a powerful spirituality, the kind which if internalized and truly believed in, and made the dominant force in a community’s thinking and acting on social questions, would radically change society.”6 We find such spiritualities in socially-engaged BECs and in faith-based social movements and networks.

Questions for Reflection

How far are religious practices in the BECs, such as Bible sharing, helping to create a counter culture which is questioning the pragmatic and instrumental logic of post-modernism? Are its religious practices strengthening and extending the bounds of solidarity, nurturing ever greater sensitivity to social justice? Is the spirituality of BECs enabling their members to live in the midst of both traditional local and modern global values systems, enabling them consciously to decide upon what is of value, what is possible? Is their spirituality making it possible for members to attain their own forms of modernity, a world that is still populated with both capricious nature spirits and protective ancestral spirits, as well as ghosts and devils, the internet and hand phones?

Spirituality and Social Justice

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5 India (secular state with large Hindu majority) and Indonesia (secular state with large Muslim majority) have some of the most advances legislation on gender justice anywhere.

6 Claver, op cit., p.160.
As concerned Christians, members of BECs engage in analysing social problems that they themselves face, and those faced by their neighbours. They ask: who is benefiting what, who is loosing out and why? How has the situation developed over the past five, ten, fifteen years?

In multi-faith societies, socially-engaged BECs are almost invariably open to inter-faith collaboration in efforts to lessen poverty and stem corruption, to struggle for greater social justice and work for more ecologically-enhancing economic development.

Questions for Reflection

Do the religious practices of the BEC tend to make its members more ready to accept their fate, remain passive and turn inwards on themselves, or do their religious practices inspire them with the Gospel vision of a community of equals living in loving solidarity and compassionate justice? Do their religious practices tend to make members quietly conformist or do they empower them to readily resist social injustice?

This is not a question of selecting specific Bible passages or opting for particular devotions, but rather the way the Bible and religious practices are inducing basic attitudes.

Spirituality and People of Other Faith Traditions

Wherever Christians are a minority, as they are in Asia apart from in the Philippines and Timor Leste, the choice is to withdraw inwards, to reinforce what distinguishes us from others (rosaries, statues, grottos, Marian pilgrimages), and reduce religious observance to community ritual for individual comfort and support. The alternative, the dream behind BECs, is that Gospel spirituality will be appropriated through openness to the Spirit wherever She blows, through dialogue with people of other faith communities, identifying oneself as leaven, as salt, as a beacon in society. Surveys show that in practice, a majority of BECs are concerned with their own members, their personal, family and social life; only a minority reach out as a small committed communities to engage with wider society. Also, research in five Indonesian cities found that Catholics active in the charismatic movement had a decidedly more negative attitude to Muslims than other Catholics.

Questions for Reflection

Does the stronger our faith identity, the more active our religious involvement, and the more fervent our spiritual commitment, inevitably entail a distancing from people of other faith traditions, demand negative stereotyping? Is it to be expected that the more fervent our spirituality, the less likely we are to listen and learn from people of

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other faith traditions? Does openness to “the other” always imply compromise, shallowness, a lack of commitment?

Devotions celebrated in BECs can be specifically Catholic while sensitive to members of the majority faith in a multi-religious society. Religiosity can be ecumenical or exclusive, open to “the other” as fellow pilgrims or set up impervious religious identity boundaries.

Spirituality and Popular Religiosity

Religious practices either reinforce a culture of the inarticulate or free them from such. In the latter case, ordinary people are able to make choices and claim a role in remaking their world. The spirituality of popular religiosity can work both ways. Feeling powerless to improve the national political culture and faced with the erosion of public ethics, which seem impervious to any action by the poor majority, what remains is the “weapons of the weak”, that is, popular rituals and devotions that symbolically resist the encroachment of global and local capitalist tentacles of social injustice. Popular rituals potentially play an important role in BECs, if and when social movements for societal renewal have occasion to irrupt. A mobilisation of concerned people to tackle political and economic corruption, for instance, can transform the spiritual landscape of BECs. Such “politics of conscience” can break through the enervating dynamics of conventional popular religiosity. Suffering often lies at the core of many popular devotions.

Spirituality and Suffering

Throughout much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and by no means confined to areas once colonised by Spain or Portugal, the crucified Christ and the Mater Dolorosa are central in devotional life. There is a stark difference between sentimental devotion and biblically-inspired devotion. We can discern the difference in the way devotions impact on life. The assimilation of Catholic devotions by local indigenous cultures has taken place in quite diverse ways.

In parts of the Philippines, where young men have themselves physically nailed to a cross on Good Friday, the pain inflicted is very much a “shamanistic” exercise, a source of personal and spiritual empowerment, whereby intense suffering provides the inner strength to overcome the challenges of another year. In other areas, such as in eastern Indonesia, crucifixion tableaus on Good Friday reinforce a sense of helplessness, failure, sinfulness, of passive resignation to painful fate.

Questions for Reflection

10 For background see, José de Mesa, And God Said, “Bahala Na!” The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context. Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1979.
Do the Stations of the Cross during Lent, the Holy Week liturgy, and the tableaus on Good Friday reinforce a sense of helplessness, inevitability, a quiet acceptance of fate? Conversely, does such empathy with the suffering of the Crucified One and His mother, open devotees up imaginatively to the suffering around them, and so inspire them to do something to relieve it?

Popular religiosity reminds us of the importance of rituals and devotions for the mass of ordinary people in rebuilding their world and in creating solidarity. Both the role and the form that these rituals take tell us how the weak can maintain a ray of hope in situations that do not give any apparent cause for hope (see Rm 4:18). Through popular devotions, the crushed reed will not be broken nor the faltering wick snuffed out. (cf Is 42:3)

Popular religious practices can increase personal and communal self-respect, and strengthen trusting relationships among ordinary people who refuse to resign to fate. Popular religious practices produce an experience of solidarity and self-reliance, which in the right conditions raises social awareness, giving rise to a spirit of struggle, while increasing personal and communal self-respect.

It may well be that ordinary people in their BECs are creative agents who, through their Bible sharing and popular devotions, are forging their own identity in the face of a tsunami of social pressure.

**The Spirituality of Bible Sharing**

The majority of BECs are primarily concerned with their own members. Many are comforted by traditional devotions while also seeking spiritual insights for personal and family life in Bible sharing. Meanwhile, a minority of BECs are socially engaged with followers of other faith traditions, and read the Bible in order to discern Christ’s presence in “the other”, and are involved in inter-faith networks for social transformation.

**Question for Reflection**

What role is Bible sharing playing in solving the problems of daily life, as families, neighbourhoods and with the wider society?

A transformative spirituality will approach the Bible in any number of contextual ways, recognising the social, cultural, economic and political context of any passage being pondered. For Bible sharing is not just a sharing of experiences and insights; it is at the heart of spirituality and leads to shared action with shared responsibility.

An example. One BEC has members who are HIV/AIDS survivors, both widows and men, married and single, the young and not so young. Most are returned migrants. Rejected by their families (what spirituality is at work here?), and consciously ignored by the pastor and pastoral council who “pass by on the other side” (Lk. 10: 31-32), they meet regularly for mutual support, and to share information, pain, problems and possibilities. In the Scriptures they have met Jesus personally. On one occasion they shared the story of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn
This reading gave them new meaning, renewed strength, fresh hope and further self-respect as friends and followers of Jesus, despite rejection by the wider society and the official Church. The HIV/AIDS survivors manage to weave the thread of social justice in the Gospel narratives with their life situation. They discover a spirituality within and begin “drinking from their own wells” (Prov. 5:15), and in so doing have become spiritually somewhat independent from the parish.

BECs are creating spiritualities according to the needs of their members, rooting them in an increasingly rootless society, and so they discover a new vitality. When this happens, BEC biblical spirituality can be seen as a form of local wisdom from which the official Church can learn and grow.

**Liturgical Spiritualities**

Liturgical celebrations can also be influential on the spiritual life of BEC members, for emotions, feelings and attitudes are fed by symbols and rites more than by formal doctrine. In the context of BECs, the celebration of the sacraments can be rooted in the life experience of the people. This is not automatic.

Where Christians are a minority, or where social upheaval is endemic, religion can tend to confine itself to ritual. Here liturgy is an internal matter for the congregation, reinforcing personal commitment and communal identity, a source of inspiration and comfort for individuals and family life. The alternative, is to celebrate liturgy in the BEC as the celebration of God’s creative and salvific presence in the whole of life, a sacramental celebration of life’s value, meaning and purpose in Christ. Such liturgies of Word and Eucharist can change values, for instance, from tolerance of corruption, injustice and the devastation of the ecology to acknowledging them as wrong, harmful and destructive. With the accelerating destruction of communities and the earth in much of Asia and Africa, such a spirituality sees the root values of global capitalism as sinful: individual acquisition, unbridled greed, the deification of the market place with the subjugation of the poor to the profit of the super-rich. Such liturgies are at once all embracing and prophetically challenging.

**Questions for Reflection**

How creative and life-giving are our BEC liturgical celebrations? Do they consciously unite the person and proclamation, the life and deeds of Jesus the Christ with His members in the BEC, their life and their daily struggle?

Liturgies can include or exclude, embrace or ignore. The joy of our Catholic sacramental and prophetic worship can inspire daily life when celebrated in small communities, when rooted in their daily struggle.

**Spirituality and Basic Ecclesial Communities.**

In this essay I have understood BECs to be relatively small communities of trust, of around 15 to 20 families, who can easily get together regularly to listen to and grapple with God’s Word, to

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share daily issues and problems among themselves and in wider contexts, and then seek out solutions in the light of God’s Word - and act on them. Such BECs tend to act as semi-autonomous communities in dynamic networks. However, where BECs are diocesan policy, it can come about that every parish is divided into small groups, some of which are true BECs, others little more than administrative units of the parish that also gather for prayer.

The character of the BEC – a small creative faith community or, conversely, a devotional and administrative unit, very much decides which spirituality will be appropriated by its members. A clericalised Church will tend to absorb BECs as administrative and devotional units within a parish under the authority of the priest and his pastoral council. Here spirituality gives personal comfort and sustenance in patient hope for God’s shalom in the next life. On the other hand, a participative, dialogal Church will make room for a variety of BECs, ecclesial and social movements with varying relationships with parish and diocese. Of these, many will mature with a socially-engaged spirituality, a faith-based commitment actively witnessing to and struggling for Gospel values in social life.

BECs and socially-engaged ecclesial movements and networks are the best place to birth and mature a biblical spirituality, the small trusting community where the members themselves learn to live and act joyfully in solidarity with the victims of local and global injustice, where they both spontaneously and consciously fuse the best of their cultural values with those of the Gospel.