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| **500Years of Christianity and Beyond, Our Stories of Communion, Participation and Mission**  **+Pablo Virgilio S. David**  **INTRODUCTION**  **As you well know, the year 2021, which we celebrated as the 500th Year of Christianity in the Philippines coincided with the 30th anniversary of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991). And for me, PCP 2 is what comes to mind immediately when we speak of “stories of communion, participation and mission” in the Philippine setting. I consider it one of the most intense expressions of synodality in the Philippine Church.**  **It was actually after we celebrated the 20th anniversary of PCP2 in 2011 that the CBCP decided to zero in on 9 pastoral priorities, focusing on one priority for each year, as a conscious way of preparing for the 500th year of Christianity in 2021. And so from 2013-2021, we focussed on each of the 9 pastoral priorities per year: FAITH (Integral Faith Formation) in 2013, the LAITY in 2014, the POOR in 2015, the EUCHARIST & FAMILY in 2016, the PARISH as Communion of Communities in 2017, the CLERGY & CONSECRATED PERSONS in 2018, the YOUTH in 2019, ECUMENISM, INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE & THE INDIGEOUS PEOPLES in 2020.  We celebrated the final year 2021 as the YEAR OF MISSION, and extended it until 2022 because of the pandemic.  We will be concluding it with the 2nd national mission congress, which will take place on April 17-24 in Cebu, and I am taking this opportunity to invite you to attend it virtually, especially because you are very much a part of the missioning of the Philippine Church in North America.**  **We did not expect 2021 to coincide with yet another important event in the life of the Universal Church, the Synod on Synodality that is scheduled for October 2023, but which Pope Francis launched already in October 2021, to allow for a greater participation of the local churches throughout the world.  I understand that this HAPAG KUWENTUHAN is part of your own National Synodal Consultation there in the United States.**  **We are about to wind up our own consultation process in the Philippines. We hope to receive 86 diocesan synodal reports by June 3 so that we could start preparing for our own National Synodal Consultation, which will take place on July 4-7, 2022.**  **I imagine how you our expat Filipinos are contributing to this synodal consultation yourselves as lay people, religious and priests involved in Filipino communities present in various parishes and dioceses in the United States.  Within a multicultural setting like the USA, where Catholics from various enthnicities interact with each other, I imagine how precious your input will be for the Local Church in the North American setting.**  **The 500 YoC and the Synod on Synodality that coincides with the 30th anniversary of PCP2, these will be our contextual time frames for this discussion, with the objective of looking ahead to the future that awaits the Philippine Catholic Church both in the Homeland and the Diaspora.**  **I will divide the discussion in two major parts.  In the first part I will define the present-day Filipino setting by qualifying it as “POSTCOLONIAL” (in reference to 2021 as the 500th year since Christianity first came to our country), and POSTCONCILIAR (60 years after the second Vatican Council and 30 years after the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, that are our sources of inspiration for the aspiration for a more synodal Church).**  **In the second part, which will be relatively shorter, I will try to articulate some points on the kind of Future that awaits the local Church in the Homeland, which you in the Diaspora are very much a part of.  Let us now begin with the first part which will come in two sections: the postcolonial and the postconciliar settings.**  **PART ONE, Section One:**  **First, in the context of the 500 YoC, we qualify our Present Ecclesial Setting as POSTCOLONIAL**  **What did we really want to celebrate about 1521?  This was the question that was raised by some Filipino Church historians after the CBCP announced its intention of celebrating the 500 YoC in 2021.  The basis for their reaction is the fact that  an earlier generation of Philippine Bishops actually celebrated 1965 as the “400th Year of Evangelization in the Philippines”, as attested by some commemorative stamps. Most likely, forty-three years from now, a new generation of bishops in the CBCP will be celebrating the “500th Year of Evangelization in the Philippines in 2065”, and they’ll be asking, “So what did they celebrate in 2021”?**  **At the risk of being anachronistic, in the postcolonial setting, it is hard to apply the term “evangelization” in an unqualified way to the process that brought about the “Christianization” of the natives of these islands.  Why?  Because we are aware that the means that achieved the submission of the natives to the Christian faith was through a coercive military conquest or colonization.**  **For lack of time, let me sum up in five points what I would call a postcolonial appreciation of the 333 years of missionary work that led to the appropriation of the Christian faith by the natives of these islands who would later claim a common national identity called FILIPINO.**  **Point 1: We celebrate the coming of the Christian faith as a gift from God THROUGH Spain, not FROM Spain.  Why?  Because it also came at a huge cost—at the cost of 333 years of colonial rule.**  **The theme GIFTED TO GIVE, which we adopted for the celebration of 500 YoC is inspired by that line in the mission discourse of Jesus in Matthew 10:8, “Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give.”   You give freely what you received freely. There are people who cannot think of Christianity as a gift FROM Spain because they are aware that it did not really come as a gift. It came at the huge cost of colonial rule.  Is there any way of celebrating the coming of the Christian faith in these islands without in effect celebrating more than three centuries of Spanish colonial rule?**  **My answer is yes.  After all, while we eventually rejected colonialism, but we kept the Christian faith.  It means that our ancestors were intelligent enough to distinguish between the two.  We do not have to celebrate the coming of Christianity to our country without having to give a historical justification to colonization.  It is wrong.  But can something wrong be instrumental in bringing about something good?**  **I think of the story of Joseph the Dreamer in the Book of Genesis (37-50) as a good Biblical-theological basis for the relationship between colonial rule and the Christian faith.  It is something of a reply to the classic theological issue, “Why does God allow evil in this world?” We get the answer from Joseph when he says to his brothers, “Have no fear.  Can I take the place of God?  Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good to achieve his present end, the survival of many people.”  In other words, what he is saying comes close to the Thomistic principle, “Sometimes God allows evil when he knows that a greater good can come out through it.”**  **Point 2: We repudiated colonial rule but kept the Christian faith because we have succeeded in owning it, in allowing it to grow on the fertile soil of our native culture, religiosity and spirituality.**  **I think at some point in 1521 Magellan realized he was not bringing God to them; he was rather finding God among them!  He was touched by the nobility, their compassion, warmth and hospitality of the natives who opened their doors to them when they came as strangers in need of help.  No wonder Magellan quickly shifted from being a mercenary to acting like a missionary, despite all his awkwardness and limited knowledge of the Christian faith himself.  He did not even feel the need to catechize or educate them in the faith.  He was recognizing what was there already and giving it a name: CHRISTIAN.  The name-giving, the ritual baptism, for him were almost with the purpose of merely CONFIRMING what he felt was there already.**  **Christianity, as it is presently lived by Filipinos, is partly already a product of a long process of INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS between the Spanish and the native spiritual worldviews.  At some point the Christian faith succeeded in taking root in the fertile soil of our native culture and spirituality and evolving into an all together unique expression of our own version of the Christian faith.**  **The more humane approach to evangelization presupposes the willingness to make space for mutual accommodation and for an intercultural dialogue.  The basic exchange of good will becomes the fertile ground for evangelization, the recognition that, at the very base, the strangers can be our friends too.  That they are as capable as we are of love, care, and compassion. That before Christians can presumptuously “bring God” to non-Christians, they must have the humility to “find God” already present among them.**  **Mutual accommodation gives the one the space to interpret the faith of the other, whether rightly or wrongly, in their own terms.  After all, the natives have no other way of interpreting the worldview that their foreign guests bring with them than in their own indigenous worldview and culture.**    **Accommodation makes way for indigenization, and hopefully also for appropriation, as evidenced by our popular religious practices. It is these intercultural dialogues that pave the way for the emergence of new forms of accommodation and appropriation of a faith that comes as a foreign element.**  **Point 3: The same Christian faith that the conquistadores tried to use in order to pursue their colonial purposes in our country also eventually inspired the natives to dream of freedom and national sovereignty around three and a half centuries later.**  **It is the same Christian faith that eventually motivated them to defend their human dignity as “Indios” and their right to be called “Filipinos”, in their desire to put an end to tyranny and colonial rule.**  **Our own ancestors were intelligent enough to sift through the grain and the chaff in what the Spaniards had brought to them. They also eventually learned to distinguish between the missionaries who had totally allied themselves with the colonial politics of the conquistadores and those who were critical of it, those who had the courage to defend the rights of the natives against the abuses and cruelties of the colonial masters (the likes of Domingo de Salazar—first archbishop of Manila, who was influenced by Bartolome de las Casas of Latin America).**  **The mere fact that we eventually repudiated colonial rule but continued to embrace the Christian faith even after we won the revolution could only mean that the natives did not equate Christianity with Colonialism. At some point, the faith that they had embraced was no longer alien to them. It had succeeded in taking root on the rich soil of our innate spirituality as a people.**  **Point 4:  The tendency to caricature the Philippine Clergy as “Frailes” and equate them with the Padre Damaso of Rizal’s fictional novels is a product of an anti-clerical ideological reading of history.  Unknown to many Filipinos, it was actually the struggle of the native secular clergy to put an end to frailocracy that served as the spark that ignited the nationalist revolution.**  **All of this has been well argued by John Schumacher SJ in his book “Revolutionary Clergy” (Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement, 1850-1903).**  **It was almost inevitable for the disenchanted native clergy to espouse nationalist ideals and be either overtly or covertly supportive of the anti-colonial revolution.  The Spanish missionary religious orders continued to cling like barnacles on the parishes they had established and directly administered for more than three centuries.  They also caricatured the native secular priests whom they themselves had trained in the few seminaries they established for native candidates as spiritually and morally inferior.  This is precisely the reason why “fraile” developed such a negative meaning for Filipinos.  Their political role in the colonial regime  would soon be known as FRAILOCRACY.  And so it had to take a revolution to unseat them once and for all and allow the native clergy whom they themselves had trained, to take over.**  **Finally, Point 5:  How the Philippine Church has transitioned from a mission-receiving to a mission-sending country after 500 YoC is one of the best signs of a nation that has indeed been GIFTED TO GIVE.**  **Although we have also sent religious missionaries in many countries abroad, it is important to recognize that the most effective missionaries AD GENTES are migrants and OFWs, whom Pope Francis calls smugglers of the faith (“Contrabandistas de la Fe”).**  **In our CBCP Pastoral letter on 500YoC, we quoted from the homily of Pope Francis to the Filipino migrant Catholics gathered together in Rome. There he urged the Filipinos “to persevere in the work of evangelization—not proselytism, which is something else.”  He said, “The Christian proclamation that you received needs constantly to be brought to others…”  He also expressed how this could be carried out more concretely by asking us “to care for those who are hurting and living on the fringes of life.”**  **In that gathering, Pope Francis warmed the hearts of our Catholic OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) when he said, “You received the joy of the Gospel… and this joy is evident in your people… in your eyes, on your faces, in your songs and in your prayers.  In the joy with which you bring your faith to other lands.”  He also humored us by referring to our OFWs as “smugglers of the faith” because, he said, “wherever they go to work, they sow the faith,” and he regards their “discreet and hardworking presence” as “a testimony of faith…through humble, hidden, courageous and persevering presence.”**  **This gift of our migrant Filipino Catholics especially OFWs who are becoming our new missionaries is at the same time a challenge.  It is no doubt a gift because they are now bringing new life to the Catholic faith in countries where Churches have become empty and the faith has grown cold. They also represent the Church of the Poor since many of them come from the poorer sectors of the Philippine society who have been forced to leave their country in search of decent means of employment for their families. They have also transported with them to their host countries their popular religious practices and devotions (Santo Nino, Nazareno, Simbang Gabi, Pabasa, Penafrancia, Perpetual Help, etc.)**  **This call is likewise a challenge according to the Pope, because our Catholic OFWs usually come with practically no preparation for this missionary role.  One of my wishes, therefore, as a bishop in my own diocese is to take very seriously the faith formation that is provided by our Basic Ecclesial Communities among the Urban Poor, since most of the prospective OFWs who will find themselves as “accidental missionaries” will be coming from among them.  Now we move to the second context, the POSTCONCILIAR SETTING.**  **PART ONE, Section 2:**  **Qualifying our Present Ecclesial Setting as Postconciliar**  **By post-conciliar, I am referring of course to the aftermath of the impetus that brought about a radical process of renewal in the Church at the Second Vatican Council. This coming Ocober 11, 2022, we will be celebrating the 60th year of the opening of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII which took place on October 11, 1962.  We look back to those four years when the Church opened its doors and windows to the winds of renewal by learning to dialogue with the modern world, with modern societies and listening to the joys and hopes, the griefs and aspirations of people in modern times without any prejudgments, and in the spirit of respect, mercy and compassion.**  **Those years in the first half of the 1960s had so impacted the Church and continue to reorient us from parochialism, self-referentiality and clericalism towards greater involvement in society and the world in the spirit of greater inclusivity and participation, and also opened us to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.  Above all, Vatican II paved the way for a clearer articulation of the social teachings of the Church as contained in Scriptures and formulated in the social encyclicals and apostolic exhortations that made the Church more responsive to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.**  **For our part, we in the Philippines, gave the spirit of Vatican II our own local flavor and application through the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991, at which we articulated for ourselves our vision of the Philippine Church as a Church of the Poor, that took the Gospel seriously by embarking on a Renewed Integral Evangelization and by growing into a Community of Disciples. Specifically, at PCP 2, we committed ourselves  to pursuing a new way of being Church—i.e. through the establishment of BECS.**  **PCP2 facilitated our change of understanding of the Church from mere institution to a truly animated community of disciples.  We began to speak more openly about the need to promote a more PARTICIPATORY Church through “lay empowerment”.  It was also after this Council that most Philippine dioceses became conscious of holding Synods or Pastoral Assemblies for Diocesan Pastoral Planning with the conscious effort of aligning the dioceses with the objectives of PCP2.**  **Fast forward, with the conscious objective of sustaining the spirit of Vatican II, in 2021, Pope Francis has invited all Catholic Christians to relearn the spirit of SYNODALITY which he considers essential to being Church.  The term means “being on the way together”, which, in Filipino, we translate into PAKIKILAKBAY.  He invites us to live the spirit of SYNODALITY both in relation to one another within the Church (ad intra) and in relation to those outside the Church (ad extra).**  **Pope Francis defines the major aspects of synodality as COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, AND MISSION.  Communion: to be one with Christ in mind and heart, by the grace of the same Spirit in which we have been baptized.  Participation: to be part of the body of Christ, to live the life of Christ (or let Christ live in each of us as members of his body, the Church).  Mission: to take part in the renewing, transformative and redemptive mission of Christ to society and to the rest of the world.**  **He teaches us to witness to the Good News by building, not just Catholic or Christian ecclesial communities but more basically, human communities (which I will elaborate a little more in a while).  To be outgoing, respectful, open to dialogue, inclusive, always disposed to find avenues of participation and collaboration—even with fellow Christians of other denominations (in the spirit of ecumenism), with fellow believers of other religions (in the spirit of IR Dialogue), with fellow human beings of any race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, etc.**  **Honestly, I think of the Pope’s call for Synodality as an invitation for us Catholics to take our “catholicity” more seriously.  Catholicity is really about greater inclusivity or universality. We cannot call ourselves “Catholic” if we are unable to see goodness at work not just among ourselves but also outside our own ranks and groups.  If we go by the Johannine principle that UBI CARITAS DEUS IBI EST “where there is love, there is God,”  then we should be ready to see God at work in all people who express genuine care, concern, compassion and love, which we have no monopoly of.  Now let me wind up by projecting into the future of the Church in the Philippines.**  **PART TWO:**  **Charting the Future of the Philippine Church**  **I do not intend to preempt the decision of the CBCP in July this year, after celebrating the 500th Year of Christianity, the 30th year of PCP2, and as we emerge from two years of pandemic crisis.  Our basic point of decision in our forthcoming plenary in July will be, “Is it opportune to convene a Third Plenary Council of the Philippines?”**  **Actually, that decision should not rest only on the bishops if we are to take seriously Pope Francis’ call for a greater synodality in the Church.  The best opportunity that I can think of is our National Synodal Consultation, which is scheduled on July4-7, 2022.  There, representatives from the laity, religious and the clergy will be present, in order to listen to the 86 Synodal Synthesis reports from 86 dioceses, prelatures, and apostolic vicariates. (If you wish to share with us the result of your own synodal consultations as migrant Filipino Catholics in America, you will be most welcome to do so.)**  **What I foresee in a Third Plenary Council is a reaffirmation of the PCP2’s vision of the Philippine Church as a Community of Disciples responding to the call to be a Church of the Poor through engagement in a Renewed Integral Evangelization and the promotion of a new way of being Church in the Basic Ecclesial Communities.**  **But knowing how BECs can quickly turn parochial and degenerate towards self-referentiality, I foresee that the most distinct feature of a PCP3 will be the proactive response to the Call of Pope Francis for greater synodality in the Church.  We will aim for a Church that constantly grows in communion, participation and mission while consistently  serving as an agent of renewal and transformation in society and the world.**  **In an article I wrote recently and entitled, THE CHURCH AS A PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD, I pointed out that our BECs (basic ecclesial communities) are not yet truly ecclesial nor truly “Christian” if they are able to live and promote a communitarian life only with their fellow Catholics.  If they are to truly serve as catalysts of change in society, I would expect them to promote what I call “basic human communities.”  Meaning, they do not keep only to themselves like little isolated ghettoes that are too assertive of their difference from other Christians or other communities of faith. Otherwise, they will just end up replicating the  parochialism and self-referentiality that is typical of our old and tired parish institutions; they will be more of the same.**  **In this regard, the thoughts that Pope Francis has laid out in his recent encyclical,***Fratelli Tutti***, can be of great relevance.  Take note, Pope Francis encourages Roman Catholic Christians to promote what he calls “Solidarity” and “Social Friendship.”**  **And how best can we participate in this undertaking than by mobilizing precisely those who have been disenfranchized by the antiquated models, those who have been relegated in the margins? Who else would be in the best position to take the lead in redesigning better and more humane societies than those who have been excluded by the old system?  Those at the base of a pyramidal structure that is in the process, as it were, of liquefaction?  This state of fluidity is almost spontaneously remolding our societies into a shape that is consistent with that of the earth—circular rather than pyramidal.**  **I have often pointed out that our parishes, although they continue to be the most basic ecclesial units of our dioceses are tired and old institutions that tend to cater only to the “Church-going” Catholics.  They are associated with a parish church-building run almost single-handedly by a parish priest, with some help from councils (pastoral and finance councils) that are merely consultative in nature.   Most of them are on maintenance mode, trying to bring to a peaceful coexistence both the pre-Vatican II mandated organizations and the later renewal movements which have mostly become “trans-parochial”.  They cater to a minority of baptized Catholics whose concept of Church is, almost always, a place they go to for worship once a week rather than a community they belong to. Some of them get to be more involved than the others as soon as they become members of any or a combination of the ministries intended to serve the well-being of the parish.**  **The majority of the supposed “parishioners” who happen to be residing within the vicinity of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction geographically assigned to the parish remain uninvolved.  At best, they would be “present” in the major activities like fiestas,***Simbang Gabi,***Christmas, Holy Week, as spectators.  The rest remain in the fringes, especially the poorest of the poor who are on a survival mode; they are the type who would feel more at home with popular religious practices.**  **Whether or not the parish has an impact at all on the wider society or environment in which it finds itself is often immaterial in the consciousness of its membership, which, by the way is very fluid in most cases—meaning, very dependent on loyalty to the parish priest, who is assigned for a very limited term, often not even enough to implement a pastoral plan.**  **Even the concept of pastoral plan often remains purely academic or abstract for most parish priests.  Because it is required by the bishop and the diocesan pastoral council, in most instances, the documents that are submitted as pastoral plans are often the pastor’s personal plans, with the servile concurrence of the councils that are very minimally involved in the whole process.  Almost always, the plans revolve around the celebration of fiestas and liturgical seasons, and the routine activities related to the preparations for the sacraments of inititiation.**  **CONCLUSION**  **Now we conclude with one final point: the call to mission.  2021 was supposed to be the final phase in our celebration of the 500th Year of Christianity.  I have often pointed out that, in a postcolonial setting, our understanding of mission has radically shifted from proselytism to renewed integral evangelization, if I may borrow from PCP II.  We no longer equate mission with the work of missionary congregations.  Mission is integral to being Church; we cannot even claim to be Church without being missionary in our orientation.**  **No longer is mission a monopoly of the ordained and the consecrated persons; it is the business of the whole Church, especially of the laity.  We have mouthed terms like lay empowerment but we have consciously avoided confronting the root cause of lay disempowerment: clericalism.  We have also mouthed slogans like “participatory Church”, knowing how minimally our lay people have participated in the mission of the Church towards society.**  **Because we practically equate mission with***Missio ad Gentes***, we have tended to ignore the fact that the people we are being sent to, need not be far from us; they may just be around us, out there in the margins, in the peripheries of society—people who are treated by most modern societies as if they did not exist.**  **In our diocese, because we have noted the presence of huge populations of informal settlers in our peripheries, people who hardly have any contact with the Church even if some of them still have their children baptized in nearby parishes, people who remain “unChurched” despite the presence of “parish Churches” not very far from where they are, we have resolved to put up, not new parishes but “mission stations”.  These mission stations are intended to reorient parishes from parochialism to mission outreach.  They are run by full-time mission chaplains that have the full support of the diocese and the parishes which they belong to, geographically.  The chaplains need not be ordained priests; they can be consecrated persons or full time lay missionaries who are willing to live with the poorest of the poor, to make the Church truly present in their midst.  Their main objective is not to build a “parish Church” but to build community, yes, ecclesial communities that promote basic human communities among the poor.  They are what we regard as leaven in a mass of dough.**  **The communities that are promoted by our mission stations are consciously allowing themselves to be guided by***Fratelli Tutti***; they are open to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and collaborative work for the common good.  They are open to partnerships with GO’s (government organizations) and NGO’s (non-government organizations), with LGU’s (local government units) and barangay officials when it is for the common good and the welfare of the most disadvantaged sectors in the community: the unemployed, the elderly, the physically and mentally ill, children suffering from malnutrition, people with disabilities, people with substance use disorder, abused women and children, etc.**  **Lately, I realized that the pandemic has forced most of our parishes, even the traditional ones, to do the same.  Namely, to be concerned, no longer about simply maintaining their routinary parochial activities but opening up to collaborative action towards mitigating the adverse effects of the Covid19 pandemic, such as health care volunteer work, psychological first aid, contact tracing, feeding the hungry and getting engaged in the rest of the corporal works of mercy.  If our parishes are not folding up in this time of crisis, it could only mean we are gradually succeeding in reorienting them towards mission.  How to do this in a more organized, more inclusive, more community-oriented and more evangelical way is the big challenge for all of us.**   |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | ReplyReply allForward | |  |  |