



In What Sense is BEC an Expression of Synodality in the Grassroots?

ABSTRACT

Synodality is often perceived as a call for increased engagement and inclusivity in the decision-making processes within the church, rather than being viewed as a means to foster a missional orientation. From a mission-centric perspective, synodality provides an opportunity to reimagine the base ecclesial communities (BECs) in the Philippines, aligning them with the evolving needs of a post-pandemic ecclesial landscape. This paper explores how BECs, an ecclesial movement that gained prominence in the Philippines following Vatican II's renewed ecclesiology, can serve as a framework for realizing a synodal church in the grassroots. The discussion is structured into three main sections. Firstly, it traces the origins and development of the BEC movement in the Philippines, with a particular focus on Mindanao. Subsequently, it delves into the ecclesiology underpinning this movement. Finally, the paper reflects on how this ecclesial reality can manifest the principles of synodality in practice. The concluding part offers cursory reflections on the future prospects of the BEC movement within the context of Mindanao, considering the dynamic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of discussions surrounding synodality in both academic and ecclesiastical circles underscores the pressing need for the church to undergo revitalization and restructuring in the contemporary context.¹ Synodality is most often perceived as a call for increased engagement and inclusivity in the decision-making processes within the church, with less emphasis on its role in fostering a missional orientation. It is paramount that the church introspectively examines its existing structures, governance, and procedures, particularly with the aim of addressing issues such as clericalism, male dominance, and instances of abuse within its institutions. However, it is equally vital to grant more elbowroom to the conversation on the missional implications of synodality. From a mission-centric perspective, synodality provides an opportunity to reimagine the base ecclesial communities (BECs) in the Philippines, aligning them with the evolving needs of a post-pandemic ecclesial landscape.

As a modest contribution to the discourse on synodality, this paper explores how BECs, an ecclesial movement deeply rooted in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, can serve as a matrix for realizing a synodal church in the Philippines. Such a church would be characterized by communal bonds, active participation, and a strong focus on mission. The paper endeavors to identify instances in

¹ The proliferation of synodality talk can be overwhelming to the extent that it becomes *dull and trite*—borrowing the words of the Filipino theologian Daniel Franklin Pilario. Daniel Franklin Pilario, “Vincent de Paul and Synodality,” Facebook post, 26 September 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/danny.pilario/posts/pfbid048rVePsMFSJcPfK6m6eAi31szPA4u55CoTnTvHWyqmbvnzc13eJnseCBuVdRQktal>.

the Filipino experience of church life where principles of synodality are manifested most tangibly. It delves into the question of how BECs, viewed as a hub of synodal experience, both mirror the ecclesiology of Vatican II and contribute to the realization of a more synodal church. The discussion unfolds in three sections, starting with an exploration of the origins of BECs in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao. It proceeds to a brief examination of the ecclesiology that underpins the movement. The final section offers insight into how BECs can serve as both a model and a driving force for synodal ecclesiology. By way of conclusion, the paper provides cursory reflections on the future trajectory of BECs in the post-pandemic landscape of Mindanao.

ECCLESIOGENESIS OF BECS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Karl Gaspar, a noted Filipino anthropologist and theologian, points out that the shift in Vatican II's ecclesiological paradigm, coupled with the emergence of revolutionary movements in the 1950s to 1970s, played a pivotal role in the development of "*comunidades eclesial de base* in Latin America and the *gagmay'ng Kristohanong katilingban* in Mindanao."² The spirit of Vatican II's *aggiornamento* created an environment where the church could be more responsive to the evolving socio-political landscape of the 1960s. The vision is encapsulated in the opening statements of the conciliar pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, which urged the church to be more

² Karl M. Gaspar, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance," in *MST Review* 19.1 (2016): 39. See also Amado L. Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church: Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretians, 2016).

receptive to the currents of history and human experience in a modernizing world.³ In essence, the BECs in the Philippines emerged as a response by the local church to Vatican II's renewed ecclesiology.⁴

As far as the Philippines is concerned, the genesis of BECs can be attributed to the missionary efforts of the PME Fathers (Society of Foreign Missions) and the Maryknoll Missionaries (Missionaries of the Catholic Church), who pioneered the formation of small faith-based communities in the Mindanao region.⁵ The endeavors of these foreign missionaries, working on the mission frontlines, gained momentum following the establishment of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) in the 1970s. Gaspar describes this conference as a miniature replication of the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) which was established in the 1960s in Medellin.⁶

³ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* [Church in the Modern World], 7 December 1965, no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴ Amado Picardal, the former executive secretary CBCP-BEC Committee, and the late Bishop Francisco Claver, a cultural anthropologist, contend that the genesis of BECs in the Philippines was influenced by the ecclesial renewal initiated by Vatican II. See Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 1-2. See Francisco Claver, *The Making of the Local Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication and Jesuit Communications, 2009).

⁵ Gaspar, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance," 39. See also Karl M. Gaspar, "Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era" in *BECs in the Philippines, Dream or Reality: A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection* (Rizal: Bukal ng Tipan, 2004), 303-320. The earlier version of the article can be found in Karl M. Gaspar, *To be Poor and Obscure: The Spiritual Sojourn of a Mindanawon* (Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 2004), 152-163. See also Amado L. Picardal, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: A Reception of Vatican II Ecclesiology," *Hapag* 11.1 (2014): 127-128.

⁶ In contrast to Gaspar's viewpoint, Claver asserts that Filipino BECs are inherently native and not mere replicas of the *Comunidades Ecclesiales de base* of Latin America. He contends that the impetus for the formation of BECs in both Latin America and the Philippines was the renewed ecclesiology introduced by Vatican II. Francisco Claver, "The History of BCCs: The Philippines," in Gabino Mendoza, ed., *Church of the*

The MSPC made BEC-formation one of its central pastoral priorities for parishes and prelatures in Mindanao.⁷ It is worth noting that the MSPC played a pivotal role in propagating BECs in Mindanao, which subsequently mushrooms as well in the Visayas and Luzon.⁸

The MSPC dedicated itself to the establishment and promotion of BECs as one of its primary missions. In addition to this crucial task, the MSPC also recognized the importance of an ongoing formation program, which aimed to sustain, fortify, and nurture these grassroots communities in alignment with the specific contextual realities in which they were situated. In pursuit of this objective, the MSPC orchestrated a series of triennial assemblies designed to delve deeper into the ecclesial identity and essence of BECs. The chosen themes for these assemblies reveal the concerted effort of the MSPC to realize the renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II. For instance, in 1971, the MSPC convenes its inaugural assembly, exploring the concept of BECs as “worshipping, teaching, and serving Christian communities.”⁹ This conceptualization closely aligned with the priestly, kingly, and prophetic roles of the church. By 1974, the MSPC had advanced the idea of BECs as “self-nourishing, self-

People: Basic Christian Communities, Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference for Human Development (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 18-27. As cited in Rey Raluto, “The Struggle for Human and Ecological Liberation: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context,” Dissertation, KU Leuven, 2010: 304-306. Despite the divergent viewpoints regarding the origins of BECs in the Philippines, Raluto maintains that the movement evolved in response to the church’s call for increased participation of the laity at the grassroots level. Rey Raluto, “The Struggle for Human and Ecological Liberation: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context” (PhD dissertation, KU Leuven, 2010), 304.

⁷ Gaspar, “Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era,” 307.

⁸ Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 4-5.

⁹ Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines,” 128.

sustaining, and self-governing communities.”¹⁰ Gradually, the MSPC observed how the notion of the church as “people of God” and “communion” as envisioned by Vatican II began to manifest in the concrete expressions of BECs.

Numerous scholars concur that the imposition of martial law in 1972 marked the initial surge of BECs development in the country.¹¹ Like their counterparts in Latin America, a number of scholars, such as Edicio de la Torre and Kathleen Nadeau, suggest that BECs serve as a fertile ground on which liberation theology thrived during the 1970s.¹² Under the paradigm of liberation theology, BECs emerged as dynamic *loci* for raising awareness and advocating for justice and liberation, especially amid the backdrop of a deteriorating national economy and the extensive human rights violations perpetuated by the Marcos dictatorial regime.¹³ As a result, the subsequent years witnessed the MSPC adopting a more progressive social and political stance within the society. After the 1977 convention, the MSPC embraced social justice as the cornerstone of the church’s prophetic stance against all forms of oppression and human rights violations. This progressive orientation drew the ire of the dictatorial

¹⁰ Picardal, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines," 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Edicio de la Torre, *Touching Ground, Taking Root: Theological and Political Reflections on the Philippine Struggle* (Quezon City: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986). See also Kathleen Nadeau, *Liberation Theology in the Philippines: Faith in a Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002).

¹³ Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: A Reception of Vatican II Ecclesiology,” 128. See also Karl M. Gaspar, “Of Faith and Keeping our Faith on the Ground: The Mindanao Church in Fidelity to the Liberating Wellsprings of the Gospel Message, in *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1994); Kathy Nadeau, “A Basic Ecclesial Community in Cebu,” *Philippine Studies* 47.1 (1999): 77-99.

government, not only towards the MSPC but also towards the broader church. As Gaspar notes, in the early 1980s, many churches and pastoral institutions, including the MSPC secretariat and its networks spanning the Mindanao-Sulu dioceses, were suspected by the dictatorial regime of harboring politically subversive elements.¹⁴ Consequently, MSPC conventions were suspended. It was only after the restoration of democracy in 1986 that the MSPC was able to resume its activities. Over time, however, the nature of these base communities gradually shifted, and they retreated into reclusive ritual-based gatherings that were less engaged in social issues. This transformation was influenced by the changing pastoral orientation of the institutional church, which increasingly focused on addressing internal matters, interests, and governance.¹⁵

Several years after the fall of the martial law regime, the church embarked on a new chapter in its life and mission with the convening of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II). Building upon the inspiration of Vatican II, the 1991 convention steered the course of the second wave of BECs development in the Philippines. This historic gathering culminated in the publication of “The Acts and Decrees of PCP II,” which conveyed a resolute commitment to guide the church towards a renewed integral evangelization by becoming a *church of the poor*. The essence of this renewal lay in the aspiration to integrate religious and social dimensions of life. Rooted in an ecclesiological perspective that views the church as a nexus

¹⁴ Gaspar, “Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era,” 306–309. See also Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: A Reception of Vatican II Ecclesiology,” 129–130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

of communion, participation, and mission, the plenary council found the embodiment of the *church of the poor* concretely represented in the organization of marginalized sectors of society through BECs.¹⁶ As a consequence, the modest beginning of BECs in the 1960s experienced a massive boost following a more robust and methodological promotion, formally endorsed by the highest ecclesiastical authority.¹⁷ This signified a seminal moment in the advancement and institutionalization of BECs.

The National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR) conducted a study to assess the impact of PCP II on the church's life a decade after the plenary council was convened. The findings revealed a stark reality: the church's endeavors towards a revitalized and integral form of evangelization had not yielded substantial results, as many of the pastoral directives of PCP II remained confined on paper.¹⁸ The hierarchical leadership could only do so much by issuing pastoral statements to inspire the church's renewal. To address the inertia in promoting BECs and their seemingly inconsistent adoption in parishes, the CBCP established a commission in 2007 with

¹⁶ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: 20 January – 17 February 1991 (Manila: Paulines, 1991).

¹⁷ Ferdinand Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," *MST Review* 18.2 (2016): 49. The earlier version of the article can be found in 2015 Dharmaram publications. See Ferdinand Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, vol 2, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2015), 308-326. See also Amado L. Picardal, *Journeying Towards a New Way of Being Church: Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretians Communications Foundation, Inc., 2016), 21-46.

¹⁸ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Church Renewal: Proceedings and Addresses of the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal* (Manila, Philippines: Paulines, 2001), 56.

the mandate to invigorate the consolidation of BECs across the dioceses nationwide. The commission was entrusted with several key responsibilities: promoting BECs as ‘a new way of being church’, coordinating BEC activities on a national scale, clarifying the nature and role of BECs within the ecclesiastical structure, proposing guidelines on BECs to the CBCP, and ensuring the participation of its member episcopal commissions.¹⁹ In addition to these consolidation efforts, the church hierarchy consistently encouraged the faithful to actively nourish their faith through these participatory base communities.²⁰

Despite the concerted efforts of the church hierarchy to enhance the promotion and fortification of BECs, several scholars express concerns about the future of these base participatory communities. In “The Church of the Future and Role of BECs In It,” Bishop Orlando Quevedo asserts that the thriving of BECs represents, but does not yet fully realize, Vatican II’s vision of a renewed church. Building on Quevedo’s viewpoint, Filipina religious studies scholar Marina Altarejos contends that a renewed church, one that actively engages in transforming society and uplifting the marginalized and oppressed through the formation of BECs, remains a distant goal.²¹ She observes various factors that hinder the potential of this ecclesial movement from effectively challenging and transforming

¹⁹ A precis of the functions of the CBCP Commission on Basic Ecclesial Communities can be found in cbcponline.net/commission-on-basic-ecclesial-communities/.

²⁰ See Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines Episcopal Commission on Basic Ecclesial Communities, “Parishes as Wellspring of Mercy and Renewal: Pastoral Exhortation of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines to open the Year 2017 as the Year of Parishes, Communion of Communities,” Pastoral Exhortation, 27 November 2016 in cbcponline.net/parishes-as-wellsprings-of-mercy-and-renewal/.

²¹ Marina Obla Altarejos, *Basic Ecclesial Community: Between Limitation and Self Transcendence. A Lonergan-based Elucidation of Fundamental Spirituality* (Quezon City: Obraku Imprinta, 2007), 1.

oppressive social structures within Filipino society. These challenges encompass limited participation of the faithful in BEC activities in several parishes, clergy reassignments affecting the dynamics and continuity of BEC formation and activities, and communities functioning more as prayer groups where piety fails to be translated into socio-political engagement.²² Dagmang and Gaspar also remark that the progressive nature of BECs in the yesteryears has waned, with contemporary BECs becoming more liturgically oriented, rather than being organized and oriented toward socio-political issues.²³ This goes without saying that the task of realizing a renewed church through the life and mission of BECs remains an ongoing and relevant endeavor.

In echoing Gaspar's reflections in "Will BECs flourish or self-destruct in post-modern era?", it is intriguing to contemplate whether BECs will thrive or diminish in the face of today's more complex societal realities. According to Gaspar, the challenges posed by postmodernity necessitate a decentralized and inclusive church, one that can be both a participatory and credible force of communion.²⁴ For now, it is sufficient to acknowledge that an examination of the historical development of BECs sheds light on the synodal spirit which has characterized the earlier incarnation of the

²² Altarejos, *Basic Ecclesial Community: Between Limitation and Self Transcendence*, 1.

²³ Ferdinand Dagmang, "Women in the Diocese of Boac's Basic Ecclesial Communities: Pastoral Work and Organizing," *MST Review* 23.2 (2001): 1-5. See also Karl M. Gaspar, "Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era," 311-314. Claver echoes the observation made by Dagmang and Gaspar, asserting that BECs in the Philippines are still in the developmental stage and have not yet reached their liberational phase. Francisco Claver, *The Making of the Local Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication and Jesuit Communications, 2009), 114.

²⁴ Karl M. Gaspar, "Will BECs Flourish or Self-Destruct in the Post-Modern Era," 314.

movement, evident in its contextual, participatory, and missional orientation.

A MIRROR OF VATICAN II'S ECCLESIOLOGY

The shift in ecclesiology instigated by Vatican II has a profound and far-reaching impact on the local church. Specifically, the Council's emphasis on participation, dialogue, shared responsibility within the church, the idea of the church as communion, and its imagery of the church as the "people of God" and the "body of Christ," serves as a wellspring of inspiration for the local church's renewal.²⁵ While the concept of synodality might not be as explicitly articulated as in the language of Vatican II, a synodal vision of the church is firmly ingrained in the Council's ecclesial vision. PCP II interprets the Council's renewed ecclesiology and reaffirms its essence by outlining numerous ecclesial directives for the local church. Grounded in PCP II's vision of a revitalized church, the ecclesiology of BECs can be comprehended through several fundamental concepts.

As community of communions

Inspired by Vatican II's vision of the renewed church, the Acts and Decrees no. 37 of PCP II articulates its "vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission, as a priestly, prophetic, and kingly people, and as a church of the poor—a renewed church—is now finding its embodiment in a singular ecclesial movement, namely, the

²⁵ Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," 63-75.

BECs.”²⁶ The themes of “communion”, the church as the “people of God”, and actively participating in the mission of Christ, and the “church of the poor” are central ecclesiological concepts rooted in Vatican II’s language.²⁷ As a novel way of being church, BECs represent grassroots ecclesial realities that have thrived by embracing the ideas and vitality emanating from Vatican II.

PCP II perceives BECs as a distinct embodiment of ecclesial renewal, both in terms of the church’s self-understanding and its missional orientation. In PCP II’s statement no. 138-9, BECs are portrayed as communities characterized by “a strong sense of unity and shared responsibility” where “members congregate around the Word and the Eucharist.”²⁸ These communities tend to emerge organically among impoverished sectors of society, where individuals earnestly strive towards the integration of faith and life. The faith and poverty of the members urge them to be in solidarity with one another, to struggle for justice, and to celebrate the common life in liturgy.²⁹ Arising from poor and marginalized areas allows BECs to adapt the gospel message to the concrete context and specific needs of base communities. The proximity and context-driven approach underlying the formation of

²⁶ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 137: 20 January – 17 February 1991 (Manila: Paulines, 1991), 52.

²⁷ Amado L. Picardal, An Ecclesiological Vision and Prescription for BECs in Mindanao, Blogspot Entry, 26 November 2011, <https://justmecatholicfaith.wordpress.com/2011/11/26/an-ecclesiological-vision-and-prescription-for-becs-in-mindanao/>.

²⁸ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* no. 137.

²⁹ Amado L. Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities as a Means for Social Transformation,” Blogspot entry, 26 November 2011, <https://justmecatholicfaith.wordpress.com/2011/11/26/the-basic-ecclesial-communities-becs-as-means-for-social-transformation/>.

BECs simplify and render more viably the integration of faith with daily life.

As communities, BECs should be regarded as a tangible embodiment of ecclesial communion. It is an ecclesial communion characterized by unity in diversity, where uniqueness is celebrated as a gift to the mission of the church rather than a threat to its harmony. The concept of communion nurtures a sense of togetherness and mutual responsibility among the BECs members.³⁰ Through the act of breaking the bread in the liturgy and its reflection in the actual sharing of resources among BEC members, the community deepen its bonds of solidarity and communion.³¹ Moreover, it is essential to emphasize that while most BECs are chapel-based, they are not self-contained, independent, or inward looking entities. BECs' ecclesiology of communion promotes unity and solidarity among various BECs, with the parish serving as a connecting network of these base communities.³²

As participatory communities

The dogmatic constitution of the church, *Lumen Gentium*, establishes a connection between the *tria munera* (the threefold mission of Christ) and the portrayal of the

³⁰ Picardal, "An Ecclesiological Vision and Prescription for BECs in Mindanao," <https://justmecatholicfaith.wordpress.com/2011/11/26/an-ecclesiological-vision-and-prescription-for-becs-in-mindanao/>. See also CBCP, *Parishes as Wellspring of Mercy and Renewal*, cbcponline.net/parishes-as-wellsprings-of-mercy-and-renewal/.

³¹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 94.

³² Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 600-601. See Amado L. Picardal, "The parish as communion of communities," in *World Mission Magazine* (November 2017), <https://worldmissionmagazine.com/archives/october-2017/parish-communion-communities>.

church as the people of God. This document unequivocally asserts that the entire church is involved in the three aspects of the mission of Christ.³³

From one perspective, this triadic paradigm provides a framework for understanding the teaching, sanctifying, and shepherding roles of the hierarchy.³⁴ From another angle, it also places significant emphasis on the active engagement of the laity in Christ’s “priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission”. This participation is inherently tied to their baptism and membership within the church.³⁵

Vatican II clearly affirms that the communities of the faithful established on the mission’s frontiers are entrusted with sharing the threefold office of Christ.³⁶ Picardal observes that the threefold nature and mission of the people of God have been adopted for the BECs in the Philippines.³⁷ Given this backdrop, BECs actively foster and advocate for an increased lay commitment in the life and mission of the church.³⁸ The MSPC introduced this ecclesiological framework during its 1971 convention, and as a result, the structures and initiatives of BECs closely aligned with the threefold mission of Christ.

Similarly, PCP II envisioned BECs as a participatory church, one that promotes active participation of the laity

³³ *C.f.* Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* no. 10-13, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

³⁴ *C.f.* *Ibid.*, no. 24-29.

³⁵ *C.f.* *Ibid.*, no. 34-36.

³⁶ *C.f.* Second Vatican Council, On the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* no. 15, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

³⁷ See Picardal, “An Ecclesiological Vision and Prescription for BECs in Mindanao.”

³⁸ See Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities as a Means for Social Transformation.”

in church's life and mission.³⁹ This horizontal, participatory approach at the grassroots level stands in contrast with the more hierarchical structure observed in traditional parish configurations. With this more decentralized and egalitarian structure, the laity assumes a more prominent leadership role and actively participates in church's life and mission. This empowerment of the laity enables them to shoulder greater responsibilities as proactive contributors within the church, nurturing the growth of both their religious and social lives. Consequently, this emphasis on lay participation and leadership presents an enduring challenge to the traditional clerical model of church structures and proceedings.

As missional communities

Vatican II regards the mission of the church as essentially being the salt and light of the world.⁴⁰ The church is inherently missionary in character because its origin and identity are deeply rooted in mission, that is, the mission of Christ. Recognizing the church as the people of God implies that every baptized are partakers in Christ's threefold mission.⁴¹ This understanding compels the church to embrace a more profound appreciation of its historical task.⁴² Marking a significant shift in the church understanding of its mission, Vatican II champions openness and active engagement with the world, coupled

³⁹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* no. 98-101. See Picardal, *Journey Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 88-90.

⁴⁰ *Cf. Ad Gentes* no. 1.

⁴¹ *Cf. Vatican, Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1267-1268, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

⁴² *Cf. Gaudium et Spes* no. 1.

with a heightened recognition of the laity's role within the church. These transformative developments have left a lasting impact on theological reflections and pastoral orientations of the local church.

It is evident that the ecclesiology of Vatican II wielded a profound influence on PCP II's vision of a renewed church. In his article, "What Have we Become: Ten Years after PCP II," Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle asserts that the renewal inspired by Vatican II has left a distinctive mark on PCP II's ecclesiological orientation in two significant ways. Firstly, one facet of this renewal pertains to the church's self-understanding, which is manifested in PCP II's proposed ecclesial imagery. These include characterizations like 'community of disciples', the 'church of the poor', and a 'missionary community'. Simultaneously, the other aspect of renewal encompasses the church's evolving understanding of its mission. PCP II termed the mission of the local church as *renewed integral evangelization*, underscoring the intrinsic connection between salvation and liberation, faith and justice worship and daily life, and more. Tagle maintains that these two avenues of church renewal proposed by PCP II are designed to contribute to the transformation of the broader society.⁴³

Within the ambit of PCP II's vision of renewed integral evangelization, BECs serve as a prophetic and missionary communities that both proclaim and bear witness to the Word of God in their specific contexts. The close-knit nature of BEC members fosters a more personal

⁴³ Luis Antonio Tagle, "What Have we Become. Ten Years after PCP II," Lecture, Theological Hour, Loyola School of Theology, Loyola Heights, Quezon City, 17 January 2001, <https://www.lst.edu/files/PCP2/PCPIITagle%20WhatHaveWeBecome.pdf>.

and relational approach to evangelization, often manifested through personal testimony and lived witness. However, the prophetic mission of BECs extends beyond the realm of evangelization. BECs create spaces for the formation of conscience, shaping and preparing their members for deeper social engagement.⁴⁴

In sum, BECs represent a community of disciples existing in communion, actively sharing in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission.⁴⁵ The ecclesiology of BECs is distinguished by its strong emphasis on communion, the empowerment of the laity, contextualization, and societal involvement. These communities present a distinctive model of a new way of being church, one that aligns with the needs and realities of the Filipino people especially those on the margins of society.

A SYNODAL CHURCH IN THE GRASSROOTS

A synodal church represents a fresh approach to fulfilling its mission, one that involves the identification, communion with, and journeying alongside the marginalized in the post-pandemic era. This concept goes beyond merely enabling lay participation in church's decision-making processes and internal governance. It is important that the church examines its internal polity and structures to further advance its renewal and restructuring that befits the ecclesial exigencies of the contemporary times. However, within the framework of synodality, there

⁴⁴ CBCP News, "BECs: How small bible-sharing groups are changing society," 11 July 2017, <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/beccs-how-small-bible-sharing-groups-are-changing-society/>.

⁴⁵ Picardal, *Journey Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 88-90.

must be a balance between its way of life and its mission. Any institutional reform should always remain dedicated to serving the broader mission; otherwise, it risks devolving into a self-absorbed enterprise. Since synodality intimates a new way of being a missional church, synodal talk must not remain overly absorbed with institutional reform without providing ample importance to the missional horizon towards which the bulk of the church's life is oriented. Rather, synodal talk must place greater emphasis on the idea of synodality as “walking together,”⁴⁶ underscoring the church's commitment to journey alongside the people, especially those at the fringes of society, in their personal and collective pursuit of well-being and fulfilment.⁴⁷

In order for pastoral agents to meet the evolving demands of the times with renewed dynamism, BECs may require new wineskins for new wines. With the grammar of synodality being an important concept in contemporary ecclesiology, it can serve as a guiding framework to address

⁴⁶ Synodality is derived from two Greek terms *syn* and *hodos*, meaning ‘together on the way.’ In the ecclesial language, it indicates “the path that the people of God walk together Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

⁴⁷ To ensure that synodality does not become a narcissistic enterprise, a stronger emphasis in synodal talk must be placed on the church *ad extra*. The church's role should extend beyond mere hospitality, where it focuses on enhancing its institutions and welcoming anyone willing to be part of its community. Instead, it must actively function as a church that not only welcomes but also ventures outward, reaching out to the marginalized, abandoned and disenfranchised within contemporary society. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis conveys his hope for a church that carries the scars of engagement with the world – a church that is not afraid to venture into the streets, even if it means getting bruised and soiled. He rejects the idea of the church that overly fixates on its centrality and, as a result, becomes entangled in a web of obsessions and bureaucratic procedures. See Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2014, no. 49, in https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

the challenges posed by the post-pandemic era. The following discussion examines how BECs' ecclesiology corresponds to the principles of synodality.

1. *Diffusive decentralization.* Synodality places a strong emphasis on decentralization, enabling local communities to make decisions that directly impact their faith and social lives through the principle of subsidiarity. BECs, by their very nature, operate at a local level and are adept at addressing the specific needs of their communities. This decentralized structure coheres with the concept of synodality, which advocates for decision-making at the grassroots level rather than exclusively from the top-down. Beyond the rhetoric of procedures, however, BECs are a result of the missionary efforts that radiate outward—a concerted effort to journey alongside its people, especially those at the fringes of society. From this perspective, the notion of journeying together as emphasized in the spirit of synodality, must be perceived as a movement toward the peripheries, where the marginalized, neglected, and disenfranchised reside. It must not be misconstrued as a movement towards the center. BECs exemplify this centrifugal orientation which reflects the church's outward movement “towards everyone in order to walk together towards God.”⁴⁸ They represent a diffusion from the center, embodying a new way of being the church that originates from the people themselves and discerns how the movement of the Spirit, the salvific work

⁴⁸ Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 109.

of Christ, and the grace of God are already at work in the lives of the people. This decentralization appreciates both the contextualization and localization of the church through the formation of BECs.

2. *Communitarian listening and discernment.* The practice of communitarian and apostolic discernment reflects the essence of the church.⁴⁹ In a synodal church, the acts of listening and discernment hold paramount importance. BECs exemplify this by creating spaces where active listening to the needs, aspirations, and concerns of their members is not only encouraged but prioritized. Through communal discernment, BEC members collectively decide on their priorities and courses of action in their pursuit of collective spiritual and social growth. This practice is in accord with the synodal process, which highly values the collective wisdom of the faithful. BECs introduce a distinctive form of discernment, one that emanates from the real concerns and experiences of the people. It distinguishes itself from the consultative approach to discernment, which can sometimes be susceptible to the manipulation of individuals in higher church positions and the imposition of decisions that are reached after lengthy processes. BECs foster a way of listening and discerning that empowers their members to chart their own paths towards their own growth, making their personal and collective

⁴⁹ Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 42; 110-114.

decisions more concrete and directly relevant to their spiritual and social lives.

3. *Participatory decision-making.* BECs exemplify the principle of synodality through their active engagement in decision-making at the grassroots level. Within BECs, lay leaders and members play a crucial role in shaping their communities. This participatory approach aligns with the synodal idea of involving the entire church in decision-making.⁵⁰ BECs represent a distinctive approach that transcends the mere language of consultation; it is rather characterized by decisions that arise from immersive encounters and genuine accompaniment.⁵¹ Additionally, it carries an inherent sense of inclusivity, where every individual is valued and respected. However, it is crucial to note that this language of inclusivity should not be misconstrued as another form of centralization, as might be implied by the grammar of consultation.
4. *Contextualized cooperation and solidarity.* Solidarity and cooperation is a concrete expression of a church living in communion.⁵² BECs emerge in regions with distinctive socio-cultural, political, and economic circumstances that necessitates a contextualized approach for uncovering the seeds of the gospel within local cultures. Experiences of solidarity within BECs serve as tangible evidence of

⁵⁰ Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 67.

⁵¹ Several statements of the Vatican text on synodality refers to the consultative aspects of decision-making. See Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 68. At first glance, this might not be an issue. But consultation without real encounter and immersive experience with the people will always be lacking of substance.

⁵² See Vatican, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 61.

divine grace in the lives of grassroots communities. The grammar of synodality advocates for cooperation and solidarity among all the members of the church. With their strong emphasis on community driven by faith, BECs nurture a profound sense of togetherness and shared responsibility, which gains even greater relevance and potency at the grassroots level. The spirit of communion and cooperation that BECs promote aligns harmoniously with the essence of synodality, wherein the entire church is perceived as a journeying community.

In essence, BECs can be viewed as a vibrant embodiment of a synodal church at the grassroots level. They actively exemplify the synodal principles of decentralization, discernment, participation, cooperation, and being missional. It is important to note that this statement is not an attempt to romanticize BECs. Current dynamics within BECs reveal significant flaws in their structures and practices, rendering them far from being ideal communities.⁵³ However, these grassroots participatory communities possess significant potential as focal points for renewed integral evangelization despite their shortcomings. As the concept of synodality continues to evolve and gain prominence within the church, BECs offer a pragmatic model of how these principles can be put in at the grassroots level. Seeing BECs in the light of the

⁵³ Altarejos, *Basic Ecclesial Community: Between Limitation and Self Transcendence*, 1. Gaspar notes that it is even uncertain that a time will come when BECs would be able to fully embrace the ideals of a renewed church characterized by genuine worship, witness and service. See Gaspar, "Will BECs flourish or self-destruct in the post-modern era?," 318.

missional import of synodality may spark a resurgence in terms of its promotion.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper delves into the concept that BECs, an ecclesial movement that thrived in the Philippines following Vatican II's renewed ecclesiology, can serve as a framework for actualizing a synodal church at the grassroots level. To elucidate on this statement, the paper explores the origins and development of BECs, delves into the underpinnings of its ecclesiology, and examines how this ecclesial reality concretely embodies the principles of synodality. The discussion leads to two key conclusions. First, the paper suggests that the grammar of synodality has the potential to enrich the life and mission of BECs. Second, it proposes that these grassroots participatory communities could offer a practical framework for the realization of a missional synodal church. Nonetheless, it is to be noted that providing a more detailed analysis of how BECs manifest synodality in the grassroots would be valuable.

For further exploration, the paper offers cursory reflections and broad proposals regarding the future role of BECs in the context of post-pandemic Mindanao. Given the region's diverse cultural and religious landscape, the future of BECs in Mindanao is influenced by a multitude of factors and potential trajectories.

1. Participating in social development and transformation. Numerous areas in Mindanao grapple with economic and social challenges. This

raises the question of how BECs can contribute to social development. It is important not to burden BECs excessively on this concern. But it is crucial to explore the ways in which these base communities can contribute in significantly addressing social issues. Given that BECs are deeply rooted in their local contexts and are most often arising in areas of poor communities, they are well-positioned to initiate social projects that can ameliorate conditions of poverty and enhance access to healthcare and education. As grassroots participatory communities, BECs are leaven for the transformation of society.⁵⁴

2. Promoting the integrity of creation. The credibility and impact of BECs in promoting the integrity of creation hinge on their ability to evolve from being solely ecclesial and human communities to becoming ecological communities.⁵⁵ BECs can play a significant role in fostering environmental stewardship and sustainable living among their members. They provide a platform for educating their members on the importance of environmental protection, the ethical care for creation, and solidarity with vulnerable communities. Furthermore, BECs' liturgical celebrations offer an

⁵⁴ See Picardal, *Journey Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 99-116. See also Rito Baring, et. al., *Nationwide Survey on BECs: A Quantitative Analysis*. In *A Continuing Pastoral Accompaniment of BECs in the Philippines A 50 Year Journey*, ed. Manuel Garcia Gabriel (Manila: CBCP, 2021), 259.

⁵⁵ Estella P. Padilla, "My Personal Journey with BEC as a Synodal Church: From the BEC, Parish, Diocesan, National, Asian Consultations," seminar, CBCP's online seminar series *BECS in Synodality with Basic Human Communities. Part 1: BEC, Synodality, and the Local Church*, accessed on 16 June 2023 in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8AdiFN2FT0>.

opportunity to integrate piety and environmental care.⁵⁶

3. Advancing interfaith and interreligious dialogue in a multireligious and multicultural context. Mindanao stands as a multicultural hub, housing diverse religious and ethnic communities. In this context, it is intriguing to consider the potential role of BECs in the region in facilitating interfaith and interreligious dialogue, as well as nurturing peace and collaboration among distinct groups.⁵⁷ Moreover, in a culturally diverse and multi-religious region such as Mindanao, instances of conflict and violence are regrettably not unusual. Hence, it is worthwhile to explore the role of BECs as champions of reconciliation and peace.
4. Encouraging synodality and empowerment in the grassroots. BECs in Mindanao have the potential to thrive by adopting a more participatory and locally-driven approach to decision-making. This approach aligns with the region's diversity and the need for context-specific responses. A synodal way of looking at these participatory communities would also mean that careful attention is to be given to the tendency in BECs to mirror the shortcomings of the institutional church.

It is hopeful to anticipate that the future of BECs in Mindanao will likely be characterized by continued growth. Nevertheless, this growth can only occur if BECs rekindle their socially transformative and liberating force as

⁵⁶ See Picardal, *Journey Towards a New Way of Being Church*, 117-142.

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, 169-180.

worshipping, witnessing, and serving communities.⁵⁸ A mission-centric synodal ecclesiology has the potential to breathe new life into BECs, which, as grassroots participatory communities, can play a vital role in tackling the distinctive developmental, economic, and ecological challenges of Mindanao, while also contributing to the broader objectives of social cohesion and religious harmony in the region.

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⁵⁸ Gaspar provide an in-depth discussion on BECs as worshipping, witnessing, and serving communities. See Gaspar, “Will BEC flourish or self-destruct in post-modern era?” 314-319. See also Picardal “Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: A Reception of Vatican II Ecclesiology,” 43-45.

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