

## Recapturing the Missionary Character of the Philippine Church

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Last June 2016 I visited a confrere who is assigned in the Netherlands and he told me of the sad plight of their diocese where it has to face the reality of closing, clustering or merging parish churches due to a significant drop of active parishioners. Maintaining old structures with few parishioners is not anymore financially viable, notwithstanding the fact that the clergy are also aging with few new vocations to replace them. The phenomenon of closing, clustering or merging parish churches is not only happening in their diocese but in other parts of Europe as well.

The sad experience of the Church in Europe can be a good backdrop as we reflect on the theme that the Philippine Church has prepared for 2017, namely: “The Parish as a Communion of Communities.” Basically, the theme invites us to discern the quality of faith life in the parish; it includes the quality of fellowship, belongingness, and participation experienced by its members. And, as we collectively reflect on the situation of the parish we hope that it will lead to a renewal of commitment from the wider sector of parishioners to become involved in parish life. While many parishes in the country are still full of people during Sunday masses, we cannot underestimate the influence of secularism that is slowly creeping into the mindset of our people. We need to counter this influence by intensifying our efforts to reach out and to evangelize, especially the youth, the un-churched, and those in the periphery.

Indeed, the role of the Basic Ecclesial Communities and other covenanted faith-communities is vital for parish life. They can be a potent force for renewal and evangelization. It is important that these communities not compete with each other but create a

synergy by aligning their thrust and direction according to the over-all pastoral plan of the parish. While it is true that they may have their own *charism* to fulfill, it is crucial that they all lead towards the growth and enrichment of parish life. All these various communities should be thus integrated into the life and mission of the parish so that it will truly be a faith community immersed in the lives of its people.

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But, let us remember that the renewal of parish life as a communion of communities is part of our preparation for 2021 wherein we will celebrate the fifth centenary of the coming of Christianity to the Philippines. Hence, we should not look at parish renewal as an end in itself, but as a preparation for a bigger challenge, that is, to recapture the missionary character of the Philippine Church. For after having been gifted with the gift of Christian faith five hundred (500) years ago through the missionaries who came to our land, it is now the turn of the Philippine Church to give the faith to others. And, the situation of the Church in Europe, who was the bearer of this gift of faith to us five hundred (500) years ago, may add a new dimension and meaning to this missionary challenge!