

Rediscovering the Missionary Nature of the Parish

Socrates C. Mesiona, MSP

The theme that the Philippine Bishops have prepared for Year 2017 is “The Parish as Communion of Communities.” The said theme is one of the nine themes that they formulated that correspond to the nine-year preparation for the fifth centenary of the coming of Christianity to the Philippines. This short article is a simple contribution as we focus our reflection on the parish.

The Parish as the Face of the Church. It is said that the Church does not exist in a vacuum but in concrete space and time. Her many dimensions take shape in the local setting. In other words, the universal character of the Church is made concrete in the local setting called local Church. However, in day-to-day affairs, the Church’s existence is most directly felt in the more localized situation called the parish. It is in the parish, when people come together in faith, that we can visibly have an idea of what it is to be Church. In a sense, the parish is the face of the Church that exists as a living entity in the here-and-now.

Reflecting the face of the Church, how can we describe the situation of the parish in the Philippines? Generally speaking, many parishes in the country are still alive and vibrant. Unlike in the West wherein many parishes are in crisis because fewer and fewer people go to church, parishes in the Philippines are still generally full of people on Sundays and other holy days of obligation. In fact, for pastoral reasons many priests have to celebrate masses more than what is canonically required on Sundays in order accommodate the spiritual needs of the faithful. However, this should not be a reason to be complacent, because there are already flashes and signs of the waning of Mass attendance in many churches. Three years ago a survey by SWS revealed that the number of Filipino Catholics going to church every Sunday has gone down

from 64 percent to 37 percent. And, nearly one in 10 or 9.2 percent of Catholics who are registered voters “sometimes think of leaving the Church,” according to the same SWS survey.

The result of the survey is alarming and should be viewed as a red flag that has to be taken seriously; otherwise, we might wake up one day to be following the same path experienced by many churches in the West in which they have to painfully confront the reality of closing parishes due to the reduced number of active parishioners.

The Missionary Nature of the Parish. If the parish is the face of the Church, then she also shares in the nature of the Church as missionary. It is thus important to rediscover and emphasize the missionary nature of the parish because “mission is seen as a community commitment” (RM 27). And, where else can this community commitment take shape and happen than in the local community or parish.

This means that the Christian community that comprises the parish should also be made aware of its missionary calling. As such, parish structures and programs should have a missionary thrust and direction. The many aspects of mission should be present in the parish life especially that “the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration” (EG 28).

In light of the survey of the SWS survey on the declining Mass attendance of Filipino Catholics on Sundays, it is therefore imperative to emphasize the missionary nature of the parish. It is because “faith is strengthened when it is given to others!” (RM 2).



Building Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the Parish. There are many different groups and organizations that exist in the parish. “Name it and you have it,” as one parish observer pointed out. “In many dioceses today, Basic Ecclesial Communities are a pastoral priority” (PCP II 140). As such, they should be the main focus of parish life. Basic Ecclesial Communities or BECs are not considered to be among the many organizations in the parish, but a new way of being Church wherein communities are divided into small cells and the baptized are empowered to fulfill their Christian vocation. “These communities are united to their pastors but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name, and share not only the Word of God and the Eucharist but also their concerns both material and spiritual” (PCP II 138).

From experience it can be said that the BEC can be a good instrument for doing mission and evangelization. With the formation of small Christian communities and by empowering all individuals to fulfill their Christian vocation, the work of evangelization will be easier. There will be more workers who can carry out the mission of

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evangelization. Such work is too important to be left only to the parish priest to accomplish. Considering the ratio of priests to the number of parishioners, it is imperative that the lay faithful in the small Christian community be empowered to be missionaries of the Gospel. It is very important, especially because many who live within the territory of the parish are still considered “un-churched.” Even those who go to church are not really fully integrated into the life of the parish and their involvement is only limited to the fulfillment of Sunday and holy day obligations.

Reaching out to the Periphery. In most cases, parish programs and activities cater to the needs and well-being of members who are already active.

Sacramental celebrations and pastoral programs are usually geared towards them. But, the missionary nature of the parish impels her to open her horizon beyond the status quo and reach out those in the periphery. As Pope Francis reminds us: “We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity.... we ‘cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings’; we need to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’” (EG 15).

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In other words, the parish cannot remain to be in a so-called “maintenance mode” by keeping only what is already there existing; she has to find new ways of breaking open the status quo. In this regard, it is most desirable to create a mission team composed of lay parishioners who will reach out to those in the periphery,

such as, the poor, sick, and the “un-churched,” among others. Together with their pastor they can organize visits to or opportunities for dialogue with the people to whom they reach out.

Creating an Atmosphere of a Welcoming Church. The Church must be a home for everyone. As people continue to migrate in order to seek greener pastures, the demographic complexion of many parishes is also changing; it is becoming multi-racial. This is truer in urban parishes where they become the melting pot of migrants coming from the countryside. It is important that as migration creates “new strangers,” the parish will become a home for them. This is a great challenge for those responsible for administering the parish; they need to design programs wherein strangers are welcome to integrate into parish life. Again, Pope Francis reminds us: “The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door” (EG 47).





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Looking Beyond. The missionary dimension of the parish requires that she should not only move to the centripetal but also to the centrifugal direction; this means that she must also look beyond her own ecclesiastical territory. It means that those in the parish must not be parochial but also universal in their outlook. And, there are many possible ways by which the parish can do it. For example, it is now practiced by some well-off parishes to adopt mission parishes and support their pastoral needs and programs as the latter struggle to stand on their own. Others enter into a “twinning program” with other parishes in which exchanges of resources and personnel take place. The result can be enriching for both parishes. Or, they might intensify the mission collection during World Mission Day in order to support the Solidarity Fund of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith. In fact, to conduct a collection to support needy churches is a practice that has already been done by the early Christians as an expression of solidarity in the missionary endeavor of the Church (cf. Rm 15:26-28; 1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2:10).

Seize the Grace of the Moment. The signs of decline of Mass attendance on Sundays reveal that many parish churches in the Philippines may face a crisis, if not now, but in the near future. However, in a situation of crisis there is no better way to proceed than to face it. The word “crisis” in the Chinese character both means danger and opportunity. Though we say that the crisis many parishes may face in the near future could endanger their existence, it also provides them with an opportunity to look deeper and rediscover their missionary nature. And, it can be a catalyst for authentic renewal in the Church. We have to seize the moment! To borrow the wisdom offered by PCP II: “We live in the worst of times. We live in the best of times. But only if crisis is made to become *kairos* and we seize the grace of the moment and respond to its challenge. As we should, always, in faith” (1).

Socrates C. Mesiona, MSP, is the National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies of the Philippines, the Executive Secretary of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Mission, and the Parish Priest of the Our Lady of the Abandoned, Hulo, Mandaluyong City, Metro Manila. Recently, Pope Francis appointed “Father Soc” as Vicar Apostolic to the Vicariate Apostolic of Puerto Princesa, Philippines.