

The Empowerment of the Lay People According to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines

ROLANDO N. OLIVERIO

"Ecclesia semper est reformanda!" declared Pope John XXIII, in 1962, outlining his intention of convoking the Vatican II Ecumenical Council. The Church must be always on the go, it must not be stagnant, it must never be ossified.

In the Philippines that clarion call for reform-updating was heeded by the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) by convoking the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II). This unprecedented gathering of the Church hierarchy, the clergy, the religious and the laity was formally proposed to the CBCP in January, 1988, and approved in July of the same year. After three years of intensive and prayerful preparation it was convened in Metro Manila on January 20, 1991, and concluded on February 17 of the same year. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines was first of its kind in the world, twenty six years after the Second Vatican Council.

The PCP-II, in its *Message to the People of God* in the Philippines, declared with no mild tone that in the Church community "no one is so poor to have nothing to give, and no one is so rich as to have nothing to receive."¹ Equality in Christian dignity serves as the bridge to participation. Today in the Philippines, this participation means enabling the laity to participate more fully in the life of the Church in its task of

¹ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, (Manila: Secretariat, CBCP, 1992), p. XCVI.

mission.² Thus the loud and clear invitation in the final message: "Together let us complete our unfinished agenda! Participate in its fulfillment! And let us as One People proclaim the wonderful redemptive acts of Christ our Lord."³

Thus, while the Church of Latin America developed the theology of liberation and the Church of Africa that of inculturation and dialogue, the Church of the Philippines has opted and committed itself to truly become a participatory Church of the poor. This preferential choice is of tremendous significance. From now on, the decisions and actions of the Church in this part of the world should be aligned with that directive principle and should promote its realization:

In this context of our society today, where the poor and marginalized have little genuine participation, and when the brief but brilliant moments of our liberation have been made possible because of "people power," we realize that the integral development of people will be possible only with their corresponding empowerment. Today we understand "people power" to subsume basic ideas that go beyond the mere gathering of people in support of a cause. We understand "people power" to include greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, more participation.⁴

In the following pages it will be pointed out the specific meaning PCP-II gave to its directive formula "Empowerment of the People."

Towards a Renewed Evangelization

The Church in the Philippines is in urgent need of renewal and revitalization in the faith. There are indeed clear signs of such a need. After almost five hundred years since we as a people accepted the Christian faith and after having experienced years of top-down planning and decision-making "we still see all manner of problems, and their very vastness is daunting."⁵ the appalling religious ignorance of

² Teodoro Bacani, *Towards the Third Millennium. The PCP-II Vision* (Manila: QB Press, 1991), p.24:

³ *Acts and Decrees...*, *op. cit.*, p.XCIX.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14.

the vast majority of Filipino Catholics, the lack of trained catechists, the clergy-centeredness of Church life in the parishes and the organizations. The shocking poverty of sixty-four per cent of our people⁶ despite the richness of our land "is a clear sign that sin has penetrated our social structures."⁷

Social injustice is obvious and evident in the maldistribution of wealth, powers and cultural opportunities. Armed conflicts have been going on for more than twenty years now. Many Catholics have not been living up to their Christian vocation. We are certainly far from the ideal of a Christian community characterized by sharing in love.

Since the times of Vatican II, with its concept of the Church as the People of God, the Philippines has progressively involved itself in a kind of integral evangelization that fosters total human development and advocates integral liberation. In contrast with a greater consciousness of human rights there has been a worsening in matters of graft and corruption, which has resulted in a greater poverty of the majority of the Filipino people.

To the mind of PCP-II, evangelization was considered to be the potent force to face these realities and make the redeeming and liberating light of the Gospel shine upon them. By evangelization PCP-II meant

the proclamation, above all, of salvation from sin, the liberation from everything oppressive to man; the development of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and, ultimately, the renewal of society in all its strata through the interplay of the gospel truths and man's concrete total life.⁸

Pope Paul VI declared in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that the Church is both the object and the subject of evangelization:

The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself... She has a constant need of being evangelized

⁶ UN Study Report, in *Philippine Star*, vol VII, N. 119, Nov. 24, 1992, p.5.

⁷ *Acts and Decrees*, p.47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62.

if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel.⁹

PCP-II took these words as a prodding to envision a renewed evangelization. However, no genuine renewal is ever possible in the field of evangelization without an effective renewal in the areas of catechesis, social and liturgical apostolates. This renewed evangelization must be characterized by the clarity of its goals and by the newness of its methods and expressions.¹⁰

One of the main goals of evangelization is to seek the building up of the Church, so that it becomes a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a community of Christ's disciples.¹¹ As the true People of God in the Philippines, the Council hoped that this Church would be a "fully participating community of faith rooted in Christ and immersed in the life of the Filipino people, a servant Church in solidarity with Filipino concerns."¹²

To attain this specific goal we need to pursue it with a new participative approach. PCP-II believed that in order to attain the vision of a Church, a People and a Nation renewed, the wisest thing to do would be to work for a genuine participation of the people.

A Participative Approach

Participation according to the mind of PCP-II means enabling the laity to be empowered. The Council stated:

In the Philippines, participation largely means enabling the laity to participate more fully in the life of the Church and its task of mission... In truth the lay faithful are, by right, subjects of evangelization, active workers of the Gospel, tasked with basically the same mission as the Church's pastors.¹³

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.15.

¹⁰ *Acts and Decrees*, p. 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.39.

The final document of the Council expresses the empowerment of the laity in almost all of its sections enabling them to be aware of their constitutive role in the building of the Church and in the mission of evangelization, putting them in positions where they can serve better the Church and inviting them to take active role in the promotion of Church policies.

About people empowerment PCP-II declared:

In the context of our society today, where the poor and marginalized have little genuine participation... we realize that the integral development of people will be possible only with their corresponding empowerment. Today we understand "people power" to subsume basic ideas that go beyond the mere gathering of people in support of a cause. We understand "people power" to include greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, more participation.¹⁴

It is a fact of our contemporary Philippine Church that the task of evangelization has been largely left to the bishops, priests, religious and some trained catechists. It does not seem to be a part of the consciousness of the majority of Filipino Catholics that Christian vocation is by its very nature also a vocation to the apostolate.¹⁵ Of course there is nowadays a distinct development towards the greater role of the people in meeting the problems of the nation —greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters and greater participation of the laity as full fledged members of both nation and church. But certainly empowering the lay people to participate in both life and mission of the Church is still an option we have not seriously nor systematically tried as yet. The system of planning and decision-making in both the civil government and the Church all through out these past years can be labeled as top-down. People's participation seemed to be woefully minimal so much so that solutions to the problems oppressing the people were tremendously difficult to find. We do not mean to say that all the decisions made in the past were wrong, but we may admit that such a system of planning and deciding without the people's participation is indeed

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.113.

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n.2.

inadequate. It simply did not work. For this reason PCP-II believes that empowering the people to participate in the life and mission of the Church is an option really worth trying now.

The Council stressed the point that the participative approach is a part of the new method of evangelization. It says:

People grow in spirituality and they become a fully participatory Church only if they participate in the life of the Church...

In catechesis the learning process must be participative. We cannot go on with a purely banking method by which knowledge is simply deposited into the students' head... Liturgy itself must aim at the full participation of the people. And the social apostolate must stimulate its beneficiaries to participate in their own development, in the struggle for justice, and in the work of peace.

A participative approach will lead Catholics to realize that everyone needs to be evangelized, and that everyone is called by the faith to be an evangelizer. It will call on everyone without exception to participate.¹⁶

By empowering the people to participate we mean concretely to allow and encourage them to analyze, discuss freely and openly issues affecting their lives and to plan and act to solve community problems together and to support one another in times of trouble.

This is why they need to be motivated, encouraged and helped to organize themselves to be able to speak out their minds at meetings, to vote to adopt one or another solution, and then are free to act and pursue their decision to reality. In the first stages of the process it may appear that they seek their personal interest, but experience tells us that as the process goes on further, it becomes enlightened, selfless interest which can be considered as a genuine Christian concern for the common good.

PCP-II advocates "love of preference for the poor,"¹⁷ not only preferential service to the poor but also preferential reliance on the poor, is work of evangelization.¹⁸ It calls for the empowerment of the

¹⁶ *Acts and Decrees*, p. 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96 & 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.51.

people to usher in genuine participation of the poor and marginalized and to allow them greater involvement in the process of decision-making. To concretize this idea the Council opts to activate the charisms of freedom and responsibility and encourage the people to band themselves into people's organizations. The Council says:

We need to activate the fundamental charisms of freedom and responsibility, and encourage the emergence of people's organizations, sectoral associations and the like, inspired by the principle of solidarity and empowered by the principle of subsidiarity. The possibilities of people power are enormous.¹⁹

People Empowerment in the Basic Ecclesial Communities

The PCP-II firmly believed that to attain the vision of the Church as communion and participation, and as a Church of the poor, the current ecclesial movement of fostering Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) ought to be adopted as a pastoral priority. The document states:

In many dioceses today, BECs are a pastoral priority. Though there are many other forms of small faith communities today, Basic Ecclesial Communities are visibly a significant expression of ecclesial renewal. The rapidity of their growth in various parts of the Philippines augurs well for the widespread activation of God-given charisms among the poor. Their potential for evangelization is a great hope for the Church in the Philippines.²⁰

And again in Section 3 of the Conciliar Decrees we read:

Article 109. Basic Ecclesial Communities under various names and forms —BCCs, small Christian communities, small faith communities, covenant communities— must be vigorously promoted for the full living of the Christian vocation in both urban and rural areas.

Article 111, #1. In the formation of BECs, re-evangelization shall be given the highest priority.

#2. A formation program for BEC workers and missionaries, including a common manual, shall be developed and made available to the dioceses through the CBCP.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 53.

Article 112,#1. The laity should be mobilized to participate in the task of evangelization and look upon BECs as a means of evangelization.²¹

BECs are people, ordinary Christians who are in the process of becoming disciples of Jesus and are forming themselves into small communities. These small communities of disciples are not organizations in the Church like the Legion of Mary, the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Women's league. Neither are they a movement in the Church like the Cursillo or the Charismatic Renewal. *BECs are the Church itself in its new model.*

The Church, which is a mystery reflecting the life of the Trinity, has the mission of proclaiming and spreading the Kingdom of God at all times and in every place as Christ commissioned his first disciples. The mission of the Church always remains the same but the situation is never static, it keeps ever changing. The needs of people vary from place to place and from one age to another. Therefore, in order to be more relevant and effective in carrying out its mission, the church must change its way of being and acting at different periods of history. This is what is meant by the Church changing its models. The ecclesiology of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines gives us the model of the Church as *Community of Disciples* and as *Church of the Poor* as the most relevant way of depicting the Philippine Church today. This model is today finding expression in the BECs.

The BECs embody how the Church should be, should live and should act today. As Church's priority model today, the BECs direct us to a more effective way of responding to the conciliar thrust of empowering the lay people, of not only rendering preferential service to the poor but also practicing preferential reliance on the poor in the work of evangelization. The empowerment of the people, solidarity with the poor and the transformation of our society through active non-violence are the priority thrust of the BECs. PCP-II tells us:

As Church we must show the way of justice and love, in solidarity with all, but particularly the poor and the weak, in the building of peace...

Recourse to armed violence as a method to bring about social transformation cannot be justified in the present situation. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

road to total liberation is not the way of violence, class struggle or hate; it is the way of love, brotherhood and peaceful solidarity.

To remove social ills, active non-violence is our moral countersign to the ideologies of today that espouse armed violence to change the *status quo*.²²

The BECs are communities of the small, not in stature but in status, the poor of our society. The poor do not only need the Church; the Church needs the poor in order to become the Church of the poor. Its strategy to promote justice is not the conversion of the top. Neither is it to remove the top —the rich, the powerful or those in authority. The most important work is to empower the poor so they can confidently dialogue with those at the top towards reconciliation with justice for all. Bishop Julio Labayen, OCD, Prelate of the Prelature of Infanta, talking about the people's organization and participation, says:

We value the initiatives of people who organize themselves into self-reliant, participative, self-determining people's groups. These will enable the poor to become aware of their situation, realize their dignity and their human equality with anyone, whatever be his position of power, and give them an instrument with which they can dialogue and secure what is their due.²³

The final document of the Council wonderfully and clearly describes the BECs this way:

They [BECs] are small communities of Christians, usually of families who gather together around the Word of God and the Eucharist. 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. They have a strong sense of belongingness and of responsibility for one another.

Usually emerging at the grassroots among poor farmers and workers, Basic Ecclesial Communities consciously strive to integrate their faith and their daily life. They are guided and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²³ Bishop Julio Labayen, *To Be the Church of the Poor*. Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1986, p. 18.

encouraged by regular catechesis. Poverty and their faith urge their members towards solidarity with one another, action for justice, and towards a vibrant celebration of life in the liturgy.²⁴

The BECs are local indigenous groups of Christians who meet regularly to pray and sing, reflect on the Word of God, occasionally celebrate the Sacraments, and help one another solve the problems they face in life. Our present Philippine BEC experience testifies that these Christians are usually poor people who underscore their involvement and participation in the life and mission of the community on the basis of their fundamental equality in Christian dignity. PCP-II quotes Pope John Paul II discussing this topic in these terms:

The newness of the Christian life is the foundation and the title for equality among all the baptized in Christ for all the members of the people of God.²⁵

Following the line of thought of Vatican II, PCP-II gives the theological and ecclesial foundation for the empowerment of the people to participate in the life and mission of the BECs:

From the fact of their union with Christ, the head, flows the laymen's right and duty to be apostles. Inserted as they are in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord Himself that they are assigned to the apostolate. If they are consecrated a kingly priesthood and a holy nation, it is in order that they may in all their actions offer spiritual sacrifices and bear witness to Christ all the world over.²⁶

It is, therefore, clear that the call for the people to involve themselves and fully participate in the life of the BECs and fully commit themselves to the mission is by virtue of baptism and confirmation and it is Christ Himself who beckons them. And precisely from this theological fact PCP-II concludes with Pope John Paul II:

Each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility

²⁴ *Acts and Decrees*, p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39. Also cf. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n.15.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 141. Also Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n.3.

for the Church's mission... For the laity are never meant to have only a passive function.²⁷

Talking about the development of a just life in a just society, the Council believes that one of the truths in the social doctrine of the Church that stands out as urgent and necessary is the empowerment of the people. PCP-II stresses this point:

The building of God's Kingdom begins, after all, on earth and deepens on human cooperation with the grace of God. Empowering people is thus a the grace of God. Empowering people is thus a prerequisite in the renewal of our country. Without it, our destiny as a people would remain in the hands of the few.²⁸

It is hoped that empowering the people to participate in the life and mission of the Church will, little by little, influence the system of planning and decision-making in the Church and in our country in general. This won't happen swiftly or easily; but someday, with the grace of God, certainly it will. The Philippine Church is now serious with empowerment of the people and PCP-II has taken it as a guiding principle in the ministry of social transformation. In doing so, we risk. But we must risk courageously. People empowerment will not be all harmony and light. It should be remembered that this is something new, extremely difficult, and of tremendous value. PCP-II is, however, convinced that

no social transformation is genuine and lasting where people do not actively participate in the process. This is not only a sociological axiom but it also stems from the nature of human dignity and solidarity. Persons are the active responsible subjects of social life.²⁹

Empowerment of the Lay People in Politics

PCP-II wishes to offer the Filipino people a gift: A vision of a people and nation renewed. It expresses it beautifully in a poem:

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 142.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 113.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 112.

That all may have life—

We shall have to create a free nation:
 where human dignity and solidarity are
 respected and promoted;
 where moral principles prevail in socio-
 economic life and structures;
 where justice, love and solidarity are the
 inner driving forces of development.

We shall have to build a sovereign nation:
 where every tribe and faith are respected;
 where diverse tongues and traditions
 work together for the good of all;
 where membership is a call
 to participation and involvement
 and leadership a summon
 to generous service.

Ours will have to be a people:
 in harmony with one another
 through unity and diversity;
 in harmony with creation,
 and in harmony with God.

Ours shall be a civilization of life
 and love.³⁰

But the picture of the present Philippine social reality stands in tragic contrast to this seeming utopian vision of a transformed Filipino nation. Life does not flow to God's people. They say that life is full of "*kahirapan*" or suffering; "*salang kaayusan sa bayan*," and even for the rich, life is empty, "*walang kabuluhan*." There is no order, no harmony in our society. Life is obstructed rather than promoted.³¹

Realities of injustice that have been embedded in our economic and political systems are underlying these perceptions of our people. Power, like wealth, is concentrated in the hands of the few —the influentials in society, the politicians, big businessmen, and the military. The Council points this out:

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 90.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 275.

Thus, on the economic side: The poverty and destitution of the great mass of our people are only too evident, contrasting sharply with the wealth and luxury of the relatively few families, the elite top of our social pyramid. And on the political side: Power and control are also elitist, lopsidedly concentrated on established families that tend to perpetuate themselves in political dynasties.³²

With this picture in view, PCP-II lays down its perception that today in the Philippines "politics has become an obstacle to integral development"³³ of our people. And this explains the bold option of the Council that says:

Our Plenary Council stands on record to urge lay faithful to participate actively and lead in the renewing of politics in accordance with values of the Good News of Jesus.³⁴

Church involvement and participation in the mission of transforming our politics both in its broad sense of organized action to achieve the common good and in its more familiar restricted meaning of partisan politics is passed on the lay people. It is on their shoulders that the job is especially laid. The document states:

In the Philippines today given the general perception that politics has become an obstacle to integral development, the urgent necessity is for the lay faithful to participate more actively, with singular competence and integrity, in political affairs. It is through the laity that the Church is directly involved.³⁵

PCP-II was indeed committed to a genuine people empowerment. In a way this is a very important goal of the Council. It is eager to get power into the hands of the people. They will then choose wisely what has to be done politically as Christians in our country. They are the prime actors in the drama of social transformation. The Council justifies its stand on empowering the people to participate actively in politics by saying that in doing so it means concretely putting into practice the ideas of solidarity and preference of the poor, which Pope John Paul II stressed in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*.

³² *Ibid.* p. 12.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 120.

In its single-minded intent of empowering the powerless to act for themselves for the good of all (with or without the help of the government and the traditionally powerful), it is a concrete putting into practice of the two key ideas much stressed in recent papal teaching on social issues: solidarity and love of preference for the poor.³⁶

The PCP-II decisively opted to make of the Church in the Philippines a *Church of the Poor*.

The Church has firmly entered the path of renewal because her hierarchy has stressed its role of service rather than of dominance. The Church is serious about renewal because she has invited the laity for greater participation in Christ's mission... Above all, the church has become a sign of renewal in electing to be the Church of the poor.³⁷

Accepting the fact that the majority of the Filipinos are poor, the Church has committed itself to solidarity with the poor in order to empower them to work out their own liberation and development. Trying to diminish, if not to eradicate, poverty in the Philippines would be a trial in futility unless the right people are elected or appointed into the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Since politics has played a role in reducing and keeping the majority of our people in poverty, so also the alleviation of poverty can come only with the correct type of politics and the election or appointment of upright and competent persons who have the welfare of the poor at heart. There can be no effective preferential option for the poor without working for the dismantling of social structure oppressive of the poor and without working for new social structures beneficial to the poor and marginalized members of our society. This presupposes political activity. And this necessitates an option to transform Philippine politics.

Our times have seen significant political activities and changes regarding which the Church has been to no little extent involved. Such changes have also intensified desire of many within the Church that as a community of Christian disciples the Church

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 13. Also cf. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 42.

³⁷ *Acts and Decrees*, p. LXXXV.

must participate towards an even more effective and lasting change in the political sphere.³⁸

The Vatican II Council reminded us:

Every citizen ought to be mindful of his right and duty in promoting the common good by using his vote. The Church praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burdens of public office... Those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics, or whose talents in this matter can be developed, should prepare themselves for it, and, forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity.³⁹

Since we understand "people power" as to include greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, and more participation, we say by way of conclusion that Philippine politics is a field rich both in challenges and opportunities where the lay people have been empowered by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. It was not an option, but a need; it had to be done:

Empowering people is thus a prerequisite in the renewal of our country. Without it, our destiny as a people would remain in the hands of the few.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75.

⁴⁰ *Acts and Decrees*, p. 113.