

The Bicol Priests in a Changing Culture

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Today's priests cannot escape being subjected – and be influenced by – three contending cultural forces: that of *religion*, of *secularist humanism* and of *scientific technology*. They must know how to live their priesthood within the arena where these forces confront each other in a titanic struggle to win their allegiance.

However, these three inter-related dimensions of priestly vocation do not exist in a social vacuum. They have a history. Identity is born within a culture. Spirituality is fed by the values of a culture. Ministry has a nurturing matrix that is culture.

But what is culture? Back in 1993, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith organized a meeting in Hong Kong for the presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Asia. The main speaker was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. His paper was entitled: “*Christ, Faith, and the Challenge of Cultures.*”

This is how the future Pope defined culture: “*It is the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterized the life of a community.*” What then is the relation of culture to religion? For then Cardinal Ratzinger, religion was the essential core of culture; “*indeed it is its determining core.*” He went on to say: “*If you remove from a culture its own religion, which begets it, then you rob it of its heart.*”

Given this definition of the vital relationship between religion and culture, we are now in a position to discuss its relevance to

our vocation and mission as priestly disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was far easier to be a priest in the Middle Ages. Then, the culture of Christianity was dominant. Priests lived and worked and prayed in societies totally permeated by Christian values. Kings and merchants and peasants had neither scruples nor hesitations about acknowledging the status of the clergy. It was a time when peasants built soaring Gothic cathedrals, when repentant princes knocked at the Pope's door asking for forgiveness. And priests did not need to go to psychiatrists to discover their identity!

But that serene era gave way before philosophical critique of a humanism which replaced God with man as the Superman. The Enlightenment created a culture where religion no longer determined its values. Men no longer spent their creative energies in building cathedrals. Instead, the age of secular enlightenment was to culminate in the building of incinerators to annihilate those who did not belong to the super race.

This humanistic culture, no longer guided by religion, soon became vulnerable to another culture – that of science with its technology. Science became the new Rome: it defined values; it determined goals; it penalized those who did not conform to its dictates.

Both humanist culture and scientific culture have given as many material and intellectual benefits. We now no longer read by the flickering light of candles; we now no longer need to wait for months before we receive letters from relatives abroad; we now can replace kidneys and heart valves. But why in the midst of this wealth of conveniences – why do men and women suffer from loneliness? Why do they resolve their territorial problems through war and terrorism? Why the poverty that impels our women to insist on going to war zones on the sad plea that they would rather perish from a bombardment of missiles than die slowly from the starvation of poverty?

For an indication of a possible answer to this angst of contemporary man we can go back to then-Cardinal Ratzinger's observation that at the heart of culture is religion. Remove it and you destroy humanity.

We are, whether we realize it or not, living in a world that is trying to build cultures without faith, cultures of despair.

How can we counter this with the culture of hope? This requires a leap of the mind, a leap of the heart which pulls us to a new civilization – one spoken of in our Second Plenary Council (PCP-II) as a civilization of life and of love. Together, we must bring into our culture the fullness of our faith with its capacity to renew our people and nation. Priests are the new architects of our renewed culture – finding ways of applying the power of our faith to the practical realities of our people's daily lives.

Let us now share some reflections on the Bicol Culture and how it shapes and influences our being and action as priests.

Changing Landscape of Bicol

Although not as much as in the more developed regions of the Philippines, the landscape of Bikol is changing. The changes occasion different reactions from us all because change is disruptive. This is true to our nation's culture and sub-cultures. For some within the Church change is a source of discouragement and anger. Faced with so much social change, some desire the Church to be a countersign providing stability and sameness.

Unquestionably, the Church of yesterday, today, and tomorrow will preach the same Jesus Christ. Yet the ways we preach and live out this saving message effectively will differ from one people to another, providing even further riches as peoples interact.

Take for example the developing diversity in theology, background, and approaches to pastoral ministry.

The unity of the Bicol priests is legendary. I imagine that unity as grounded, among others, on two things: one, a single seminary providing all the basic priestly formation of practically every Bicolano seminarians; and two, the strong devotion to *Ina*, Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia. Over the years this unity was strengthened by the annual Union of Bicol Clergy (UBC), which provides the opportunity to meet and renew friendship through the organized sports' competition and liturgical celebrations. UBC is unique in the country. I am happy that these activities connected

with Peñafrancia continue up to present with varying intensity but always the same spirit of priestly fraternity.

The matter of seminary formation is quite different. The Dioceses over the years have grown in terms of vocations and capabilities. Today there is a preparatory seminary in practically every diocese, philosophy in some. While theological studies are still in the Holy Rosary Major Seminary in Naga City, some dioceses allow their major seminarians to go to other centers outside Bicol. This is truly a sign of vitality in the local Churches in Bicol. There is however a developing reality quite unknown, at least in the degree that it is felt now. It is that among the Bicol priests today there is a developing diversity in theology, background and approaches to pastoral ministry quite unknown some fifty years ago. This diversity may be seen as a welcome change, there is no doubt however that this is also a source of weakening the traditional unity of the Bicol priests.

There are two observable and related results in the life of the Church in Bicol. One is to simply dismiss and refuse to dialogue with the priests who approach matters differently, and to associate only with people of like mind, thus refusing to be involved with other priests or with anything beyond one's own narrow world. We are all familiar with the results among the clergy when these situations occur.

It is crucial that we recognize this ambiguity. This in fact is so crucial that a dispassionate dialogue on this may result in a conversion for Bicol priests. The Church in Bicol is not only blessed in being situated in the only monoculture region of the country. We are one presbyterate in Bicol since all the Dioceses came from the same womb, the Archdiocese of Caceres, and we venerate our *Ina*, our Lady of Peñafrancia.

We have to reach out to one another, to listen to one another, to find areas of common ground and when feasible have common pastoral initiatives that express the call of the Holy Spirit. This means dying to one's own self-sufficiency and to one's own closed points of views. But this self-sacrifice for the sake of communion also offers powerful experience of the Resurrection discovered in priests' ministering together as brothers, in mutual appreciation and support. This concern is an excellent topic for our Fraternal Sharing.

Changing Image

There is today another manifestation of cultural change that affects us priests; I refer to the consumer mentality that is affecting not only the wider society, but the image of the parish and of the priest. It was simpler years ago: priests were expected to provide the parishioners with the sacraments; celebrate Mass occasionally in the *barangays*, etc. Things have changed now. Not in terms of the sacraments but the attitude. The consumer attitude tends to define the priests as purveyors of services: "In my parish we offer a wonderful youth program; we have catechetical formation, materials, training, masses, etc."

When we give emphasis in our theology of the priesthood on service and leadership, we are lassoed in the region of religious consumerism. When we focus upon what the priest does rather than who he is we contribute to this mentality. This is naturally a utilitarian view of the priesthood. In this view to be a good priest, one must work incessantly and be effective. Sometime we often feel that we have achieved little and so must be failures. That is why I understand why we can detect a general, unspoken, uncertainty among many of our priests, as to who they are and what it means to be a priest today, particularly in Bicol. Some simply give up trying to be purveyors of services. They give up having to continuously change programs, pretty much like big marketing corporations repackaging, re-designing products to keep the interest of the consumers, in our case, our parishioners.

One is tempted to launch into an in-depth discussion of the identity of the priest. While this is an interesting and truly crucial topic, I do not think that this is the direction we should turn in view of the consumer mentality as it manifests itself in the parish. Rather let us simply say that the appearance of the consumer mentality in our parishes should teach us that we could no longer take people's participation in our parishes for granted. Our people in Bikol – of course this is true anywhere – have much less tolerance for being abused from the pulpit or listening week after week to uninspired homilies. They will tend to look elsewhere when meaningful lay involvement is not developed and encouraged or when the music is poor and unengaging. As we were often reminded in our pastoral course: "*Faith grows when*

it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it."

Mobility

Mobility is evidently becoming a significant factor in our region both social mobility and geographical mobility. Parishes in remote areas generally consist of old people and children. The productive members are not there anymore: they have migrated for economic reason. Often eventually family members transfer to the places where their breadwinners decided to reside. On the other hand, parishes in the cities and *centros* are now serving parishioners who do not geographically belong to them. They form the great mobile parishioners.

These situations present a problem. Our Catholic faith is all about formation of community, with God and with one another. It is as the people of God that the Church comes together in worship and reaches out to serve. The situation of our Christians in the cities and in the *centros* militates against their giving time to form communities of meaning. Priests of these parishes practically forego the formation of community, and simply try to meet each individual person's needs day by day and try to respond to particular situations within families, without worrying about building some sort of community in which they can be mutually supportive of one another. In these parishes forming Christian community, large or small, is pushing uphill at considerable sacrifice with frequent frustrations.

The pastoral creativity of the Bikol priests in this situation is greatly challenged. The case of the parish vs. a smaller community will engage this pastoral creativity. We hear a strong push for dismantling of the parish or its abandonment in favour of the BEC, which is strongly urged. We are asked to free ourselves from the buildings, the organizations and the structures of the past.

I would argue strongly from within my own experience that the parish can be given a new life, need not be abandoned but transformed by organizing it as a community of communities, as a resource center and a locus for coordination of pastoral and missionary activities. The parish community, somehow or another,

has to give people experientially some awareness and understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose of their lives. It has to help them interpret their experience, to find God, to seek his Kingdom here and hereafter.

To achieve this, the parish community has to be able to allow people to relate to each other and to their pastor at a personal level and with freedom and trust. This is usually impossible within many of our present parishes because of their size and uneven social, intellectual and cultural mix to be found there. The first obvious and necessary step is to develop within the parish a host of a smaller natural groupings or associations. It is here that a deeper, more personal spiritual formation can be carried out, that worship and prayer can be given new life and the action can be more effectively planned and carried out.

This is hardly a revolutionary proposal. The need for such strategy is everywhere acknowledged. In fact we find this in practically all our parishioners in Bikol. We have the different religious organizations. Too many, in fact. The problem is that very few of them go beyond activities, without systematic formation programs for their members, like what Couples for Christ (CFC) and the Neo-catechumenate have. It is transformation, not dismantling of the parish, that we need. It is a mistake in my view to adopt arbitrary and simplistic solutions and strategies. From the basic cell up to the universal Church certain tasks and missions can be accomplished effectively only at certain levels. Not everything can be achieved by the parish or the diocese. Some things are only possible at the level of bishops' conferences and yet others by the universal Church. We have to decide how best to achieve any pastoral goal and maintain in good order all the structures we need.

The Family under Threat

There can be no doubt that the Bikol family – as the Filipino family – plays a pivotal role in the life of the individual, of the region and in the life of the Bicolano Priest. For the Bicolanos, the families are the most important reference group where they find security, strength and support. Present worsening poverty exerts a strong influence on the dynamics that is

taking place in most Bikolano families. The Bikolano family is still in general characteristically rural, agricultural and traditional. They face the challenges of keeping the family intact as their primary unit in society. Noticeable in both rural and urban bicolano families is the phenomenon of single parent families due to the absence of a mother or a father, or even of both parents, working in the city or overseas. As a result, the care of the children is delegated to relatives or a salaried household helps. More and more families are slowly "deconstructing" traditional roles with both parents assuming different roles as required by the situation. There is a growing number of couples only civilly married, or simply living together. The challenge to the Bikolano priests is how to offer compassionate word and outstretched arm. At times, grappling with the issues of faith and morals constricts the priest's ability to be an image of the Good Shepherd who embraces the lost sheep. Finding balance between acting as the authentic interpreter of Church teaching in a parish setting and offering the compassionate word is a difficult journey for most of us. In your Fraternal Sharing kindly ask: "How can our Bikolano priests welcome all God's people and help them grow from where they are into a deeper union with God?"

Barlin, Cabalquinto and the Bicol Clergy

At this point, after we scanned the range of challenges of new cultural manifestations affecting our living the priesthood in Bicol, one almost naturally comes to ask: "*Kaya ba natin ito?*" "*Kaya ta daw ini?*" It is at this point that I ask the Bikolano priests to look at Don Gregorio Cabalquinto, the First Bicolano Priest whose tercentenary of priestly ordination (1706) we remember this year and Bishop Jorge Barlin, the First Bicolano and Filipino Bishop, whose centenary of Episcopal consecration (June 29, 1906) we celebrate this year! We have much to learn from them.

We find ourselves at a new period, the new millennium, where technological and scientific breakthroughs are characteristic of the age. We wonder how these changes affect our priesthood and what qualities of the spirit are needed to safely carry the faithful across the great cultural divide. Well there is Bishop Barlin! He lived at a new phase in the Philippine and Church

history. It was the end of the Spanish period and the beginning of the American period. Bishop Barlin facilitated a peace transition from the Spanish government to the American government. Abella's words are worth recalling here: "*If Sorsogon did not suffer a bloody September in 1898 such as that witnessed by Nueva Caceres on the 17th and 18th of that month, and other unsavoury incidents in large scale which ordinary accompany a change of regime brought about by force of arms, it was due to Padre Barlin who commanded the respect and esteem of the people, and his pacification campaign.*" (Cfr. Abella, p. 203)

The need to cultivate the spirit of fidelity to our priesthood is essential in order to have a strong center in the midst of changes is another crucial lesson we can learn from Bishop Barlin. You will recall that part of the 'new things' at the time of Bishop Barlin was the religious revolution. The birth of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* was at the heart of that revolution. Barlin was offered the position of Supreme Head of the incipient nationalist church. He refused and vowed fidelity to the Church and the Holy Father instead.

The wave of globalization tempts us away from our original calling and code of life. The growing diversity and pluralism may turn us away from a life of service to a career and search for greener pastures. Bishop Barlin stayed with his people in the Catholic Church. This is a lesson truly worth keeping close to our hearts: many of our parishes, our people are hungry for the Word. Many of them seem to have no bright future. Should we leave them for greener pasture? The example of Don Cabalquinto, who administered the town of Capalonga for 40 years and Bishop Barlin is clear: *ours is not a career, but a call to service*. The example of Cabalquinto and Barlin was not ordinary service but exemplary service.

The changing context of our ministry may tempt us to change our identity. Bishop Barlin did not think so: instead it deepens his identity. The testimony about Padre Barlin, as chronicled by the Padres Paules (*cfr. Breve Reseña Histórica 1862-1912*) reveals the high quality of his love for the priesthood: "*He became the idol of his parishioners, and was a living example to all the clergy for his excellent virtues and unstinted name...*

a lover, like a few, of the splendor of Catholic worship and of the discipline of the clergy, he was at all times a model along these lines; not only did he set an example – he saw to it that, with whatever monetary help he could give, all other priests under his vicariate would do the same..., his circulars to his subordinated were full of wisdom and sound advice.” (Abella p. 203)

Here is a quality we all need to be effective in the variety of changes in our days: *Pastoral Creativity*. To avoid the temptation of mediocrity!

Conclusion

Let me end with an irreplaceable context for our priesthood: the Paschal Mystery.

What in fact we experience in every cultural change is the experience of the dying and the rising of Jesus. We must preach with our whole selves the timeless mystery of Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II understood this when he wrote: *“It is necessary to inculturate preaching in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed in the language and culture of its hearers.”* (EA 70). The Holy Father’s words exhort us priests and bishops to be sensitively aware of our day-to-day environment and its emerging crisis.

But we should have no fear of crisis. We are priests and bishops of Bicol! Crises are the *specialite de la maison* of the Church in Bicol. In fact we even celebrate them. Every Eucharist is the re-enactment of hope lost and renewed. Every Eucharist shows us the extinction and renewal of promise. The end of the road becomes the beginning of the way to the Kingdom. The little crisis we are going through today is but a minor one compared with the one we celebrate in the Mass! Let us discover how to live it fruitfully. □