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AND HIS GARMENT IS COVERED WITH DUST

Directions in Bishop Labayen's Theology of Praxis

Daniel Franklin Pilario, CM



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Daniel Franklin Pilario, C.M.

*Open your eyes, and see that God
is not in front of you
He is there where the farmer is tilling
the hard ground
And where the laborer is breaking the stones
He is with them in the sun and the rain
and his garment is covered with dust.*

- Rabindranath Tagore

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to be one of the speakers of this Conference. I am deeply honored to be given the chance to reflect on the theology of Bishop Labayen – the man behind social action, BECs and the Church of the Poor in the Philippines long before PCP II has canonized these theological terms in its pages. But I also feel quite unworthy since, unlike many of you here, I have not personally known Bishop Labayen in my life. As far as I can remember, I only have two vague encounters with him. First, he was the retreat master of the Vincentian community way back in the 1990s when I was still a young priest – the theme of which I have already forgotten. Second, he was also with us when SVST together with the Socio-

Pastoral Institute (SPI) held a Nationwide Commemorative Conference of PCP II's 20th anniversary in Adamson University last February 2011. As organizers, we did not expect that he would be there. So, we were not able to prepare a slot for him to speak or share his experience. Yet, for two days, the man whose theological ideas and pastoral practice were the driving inspiration of PCP II's documents was just there – humbly listening and actively participating together with the rest of the audience. For me, this silent presence speaks much of the person we honor today. Bishop Labayen, thank you for your presence in the Philippine Church.

Since I have not worked with Bishop Labayen for a time, the challenging task in front of me is to point some directions in his theology through his written texts. In an act of methodological reflexivity, I was trying to understand what I am trying to do here. Can you understand someone by merely reading him – without having talked or lived with him? Umberto Eco, one of the most popular post-structuralist literary critics, writes: “I think that a narrator, as well as a poet, should never provide interpretations of his own work. A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author.”¹ Consistent with contemporary hermeneutics,² the ‘surplus of meaning’ the text

¹ Umberto Eco, “The Author and his Interpreters” [Lecture at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, 1996] in http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_author.html (access 10.10.2013).

² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fortworth: Texan Christian University Press,1976).

possesses 'frees' the text, as it were, to be continually interpreted in new contexts. This means that the text once coded/written acquires a life of its own and the interpreter takes on the responsibility to make sense of it in his particular context.

As a reader himself, I would like to think that Bishop Labayen has done precisely this. He has freed certain theological texts (e.g., the notions of the "Church of the poor", "sentire cum ecclesia", ideologies, revolution, etc.) to bear on the historical contexts he was confronted with. In his reading/writing, they took on different meanings from what the original authors intended. It is a parallel act that I would like to do in my reading of his text in this paper. I deeply acknowledge that Bishop Labayen's life (which was accessible to many of you) is more than the sum of his texts (which is the only thing accessible to me). As he continues to live, he continues to 'textualize' his dreams by his talks, writings, interviews and his life. But we also know that it is these polyvalent 'texts' – speeches, writings, testimonies, accounts of his own life – that remain with us which we will continually interpret in our own contexts in the hope of being helped by them to live our lives to the fullest. At the end of his article, Umberto Eco also writes: "... the private life of the empirical authors is under a certain respect more unfathomable than their texts, at least as much unfathomable as the soul of the readers. However, between the mysterious process of textual production and the uncontrollable drift of its future readings,

the text *qua* text still represents a comfortable presence, the point to which we can stick.”³

Aside from his books and collection of articles, there are already several works that interpret his theology and pastoral practice.⁴ My paper is an attempt to read these texts once again and point to some recognizable directions in Bishop Labayen’s theology of praxis. Despite this most difficult task of interpreting someone’s work in front of the author himself, I am encouraged by the fact that Bishop Labayen himself recognizes plural point of view. I am well aware that this is my limited personal reading from my own *punto de vista*. I hope that this generates other readings from other *punto de vistas* as well.

³ Umberto Eco, “The Author and his Interpreters” (1996).

⁴ Julio Labayen, *To Be the Church of the Poor* (Manila: Communications Foundations of Asia, 1986); idem, *Spirituality: Challenge of the Church of the Poor* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1990); idem, *The Call of the Church of the Poor: Challenge to Christians Today* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1993); idem, *Solidarity from Asian Perspective* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1990); idem, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, Revised Edition (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute and Claretian Publications, 1995); Jesus Varela, *The Bishop-BUILDER Servant of the Church of the Poor* [Homily delivered on Bishop Labayen’s 25th Episcopal Anniversary](Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1991); Sophia Marriage, “The Place of the Local Church in the Liberation/Inculturation Debate: The Infanta Prelature Experience,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37 (2000); Sophia Marriage, “And the Word was made flesh: The Journey of Incarnation in the Prelature of Infanta,” *World Christianity in Local Context: Essays in Memory of David Kerr*, ed. Stephen Goodwin (London: Continuum, 2009), 191-207 “*Julio, Itayo mo ang Aking Simbahan*” (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute, n.d.); Maria Dulce Emmanuel Inlayo, *It is the Lord: The Life-Journey of Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen, OCD* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2013).

I will divide my paper into four recognizable parts: (1) The Church of the Poor – from Vatican II to Infanta; (2) See: To Sit at the Feet of the Poor; (3) Judge: To Think and Feel with the Living Church; (4) Act: To Take Paths and Risks the Poor Take.

1. The Church of the Poor: From Vatican II to Infanta

On March 16, 2013, Pope Francis told this story to an audience of 6000 journalists that gathered during his second major address after having been elected.

I will tell you the story. During the election, I was seated next to the Archbishop Emeritus of São Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes: a good friend, a good friend! When things were looking dangerous, he encouraged me. And when the votes reached two thirds, there was the usual applause, because the Pope had been elected. And he gave me a hug and a kiss, and said: "Don't forget the poor!" And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we? He is the man who

gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man ... How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!⁵

I quoted this at length because on November 6, 1948, the same inspiration came to the heart of a young man from Talisay, Negros Occidental as he first donned the brown habit of Carmel. Bishop Labayen would have wanted to take the religious name of “Bro. Francis” since his young imagination was absorbed by “the poor” who was closest to the heart of St. Francis of Assisi. But since some in the community already got the name, he settled for the name “Bro. Xavier” – also a remembrance to another favorite Jesuit mission to the Americas, Francis Xavier.⁶ The passion for the poor of the young novice will consume his whole life. Long before the Philippine church talks about the “Church of the Poor” in the PCP II as its own reception of the Second Vatican Council, Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen has already instituted what this means in the life of the Prelature of Infanta.

It might be helpful to go back to the stirrings of the “Church of the Poor” in Vatican II. In a recent article in *Concilium*, the Latin American liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino says that the “Church of

⁵ Pope Francis, “Address to the Representatives of the Communications Media,” <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/pope-how-i-wish-for-a-church-that-is-poor-and-for-the-poor#ixzz2h1lYHYlb> (accessed 10.07.2013).

⁶ Maria Dulce Emmanuel Inlayo, *It is the Lord: The Life-Journey of Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen*, 100.

the Poor was not a subject of discussion.”⁷ Pope John XXIII mentioned the word in a radio message on September 11, 1962⁸ – a month before the Council opened – but it did not figure out much in the Council’s agenda. There are two documents in which ‘the poor’ is mentioned (*Gaudium et Spes* 1 and *Lumen Gentium* 8) but it speaks about the Church’s mission *to* them not about “the Church *being* poor, or about it being destined to suffer persecution for defending the poor, or that salvation could come from the poor.”⁹

There was a group of bishops in the Council who took to heart this vision of the Church of the Poor. They called themselves “The Group of the Church of the Poor” composed of Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna, Dom Helder Camara of Brazil and several others. They made decisive interventions in the discussion, forwarded two papers to the Pope for the consideration of the Council, and rallied others to their cause. Lercaro gave an impassioned speech suggesting that the Church of the Poor become the ‘synthesizing idea’ of the Council not just one theme among the many. Cardinal Himmer said: “The first place in the church must be given to the poor.” In fact, several Fathers of the

⁷ Jon Sobino, “The Church of the Poor from John XXIII to Oscar Romero,” *Reconciliation: Empowering Grace*, eds. Jacques Haers et al. *Concilium* 2013. No. 1 (London: SCM Press, 2013), 100.

⁸ Pope John XXIII said: “Confronted with the underdeveloped countries, the church presents itself as it is and wishes to be, as the church of all, and particularly as the Church of the Poor.” [] According to Sobrino, “This was the first positive event in the history of this idea of the Church of the poor, which had its ups and downs over the years.” *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

Council were dissatisfied on the directions of their discussions on the floor. After many debates, Dom Helder Camara is reported to have said: “Are we to spend our whole time discussing internal church problems while two-thirds of humankind is dying of hunger?”¹⁰ After sometime, these bishops realized that their concerns are not the concerns of others. In fact, it was only in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) that the Latin American bishops were able to articulate what were inside their minds and hearts. For us in the Philippines, we had to wait until 1991 at the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II).

However, there were symbolic events that already pointed to this direction. On November 16, 1965, days before the closing of Vatican II, 40 bishops mostly from Latin America, went to the Catacombs of St. Domitilla, asked God in prayer to be “faithful to the spirit of Jesus” and signed what is now called the “Pact of the Catacombs”. What was the content of the statement that they signed? Let me give you some of the very concrete items they have on the list: (a) in terms of housing, food and cars, we will live like ordinary people; (b) in terms of clothing, we will renounce expensive colorful fabrics and golden insignia; (c) we will not possess bank accounts in our names but channel it all to our diocese; (d) we refuse to be called Your Eminence, Your Excellency, Monsignor; (e) we will avoid flattering anyone when we ask for donations; (f) when we go home, we will present this pact to our priests and ask them to understand us and pray

¹⁰ Moeller, Charles Moeller, “History of the Constitution,” *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, Vol. V (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 11.

for us, etc.¹¹ I mentioned this dramatic event in the catacombs because these proclamations find some parallels to the statement of PCP II on its vision of the Church of the Poor in the Philippines (PCP II). But this recalling also wants to remind us that long before PCP II, Bishop Labayen in a slow but determined manner explained in his talks, writings, actual programs and in his life the vision of the bishops in the catacombs.

This long journey of the Church of the Poor in Infanta started right after Vatican II formulated the documents. The year was 1966.¹² The steps were not laid out from the start. There was no clear blueprint. The programs first started with credit unions, cooperatives, ‘miracle rice’ production to Green Revolution – only to know in the end, this flurry of activities did not help the poor.

The promised emancipation to the poor farmers remained a promise... Those who benefited from the Green Revolution were the rural banks, the Japanese

¹¹ Bonaventura, Kloppenburg, ed. 1966. *Concilio Vaticano II*. Vol. V. Quarta Sessão. Petropolis: Vozes, 526-28. Cf. http://www.missilogia.org.br/cms/UserFiles/cms_documentos_pdf_15.pdf (access 11.05.2012).

¹² “I had just come from PISA (Priests Institute for Social Action) which the SELA (Socio-economic Life in Asia) sponsored. The Jesuits of the Philippines under the dynamic leadership of Fr. Walter Hogan, SJ promoted the SELA. The seminar PISA was actually on the orientation of Vatican II. It was held in Hong Kong the whole month of September 1965. Shortly after my return to the Prelature of Infanta we began to promote socio-economic programs, particularly credit unions and cooperatives.” J. Labayen, “Church of the Poor – Infanta Experience (Basic Christian Communities),” New Collection, 3.

manufacturer of the Kubota hand tractor, the oil companies, the producer of the chemical fertilizer and chemical pesticide.... My dream remained a castle in the air, an illusion.¹³

Another search began. Until in the Pastoral Conference in 1979, at the height of the atrocities of Martial Law the Prelature decided “to become the Church of the Poor”: “by poor, we refer to the victims of the system – the deprived, the oppressed the exploited, the disadvantaged, the ‘salvaged’.”¹⁴ The suspicions, calumnies, walkouts and persecution followed. The rest is history.

With a habitus of a middle class background, the living out of the vision was not automatic for him. Formed in a pre-Vatican II theology, his initial image of a bishop was that of a ‘prince of the church’ with his ring, throne and regal paraphernalia.¹⁵ As his biographer, Sr. Inlayo, OCD, writes: “He was just like any bishop of his time in his leadership style – hierarchical, patriarchal and traditional.”¹⁶ Like Oscar Romero of El Salvador, it was the suffering and poverty of his people that taught

¹³ Ibid. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Bishop Labayen himself narrates: “Ang pagkakaalam ko sa pagiging obispo ay pagiging isang prinsipal ng simbahan, ayon sa Vaticano I. Lalo pang pinalakas ng aming Carmelitanong Kongregasyon ang ganitong pananaw nang ako ay ipagawa ng pang-obispong trono sa altar at pinagkalooban ng lahat ng kasuotan at kagamitan ng Obispo. Sa dami ng taong humahalik sa aking singsing, lalo pang tumibay and aking pananaw na ang Obispo ay prinsipal ng simbahan.” J. Labayen, “Mga Pangyayaring Humubog sa Aking Pumumuno,” *Julio, Itayo Mo ang aking Simbahan*, 1-2.

¹⁶ Maria Dulce Inlayo, *It is the Lord*, 148.

him how it is to be a bishop of the Church of the Poor. There are no seminaries to train bishops, he laments. He had to learn it by sitting down “at the feet of the poor”. This brings me to my next point.

2. See: To Sit at the Feet of the Poor

I propose to read Labayen’s theology of praxis from the perspective of liberation theology’s classic mediations – socio-analytic mediation, hermeneutic mediation and pastoral mediation (corresponding to Cardijn’s process of see, judge/discern, act). Let us start with “seeing” – social analysis.

2.1 Contextualizing Social Analysis

Theology since the medieval ages has always considered itself the ‘queen of sciences’. If philosophy is important, it can only be its ‘handmaid’ – an *ancilla theologiae*. Philosophy has been studied only insofar as it is useful to theology. This is not only a medieval position and I am not talking only of traditional theologies. Some postmodern theological movements like radical orthodoxy also think that theology is sufficient unto itself without the help of other sciences.¹⁷ They are afraid that theology capitulates to the social sciences and surrenders its norms to modern science’s historicist and deterministic conclusions. This is the same fear Ratzinger had in *Libertatis Nuntius* against these

¹⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1990).

tendencies in some liberation theologies.¹⁸ In his reasoning, since Marxism has a “global vision of reality”, there is a strong tendency that the data gathered from observation and analysis “are brought together in a philosophy and ideological structure” and predetermines the conclusion even prior to the actual examination of reality. The default Roman position, thus, is to exclude Marxism and social sciences altogether from theological discourse.

It is thus liberation theology’s achievement to posit a new dialogue-partner to theology other sciences beyond philosophy – the social sciences. But even in the best of liberation theology’s tradition as in the methodological work of Clodovis Boff, for instance, the use of other sciences in theological reflection is at best instrumentalist.¹⁹ Even as it respects the autonomy of the social sciences, theological science always maintains an elevated position. The result of social analysis is useful as it becomes the raw material for further theological production. In other words, from the right and the left in the theological field – from the Vatican and liberation theology – the queen still occupies her throne.

I wanted to situate the role of social analysis in theology today in order to point out the originality and revolutionary power of Labayen’s metaphor of social analysis as “to sit down at the feet of the

¹⁸ Congregation on the Doctrine of Faith, *Libertatis Nuntius* (1984) in http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html (10.10.2013)

¹⁹ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Presuppositions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

poor”. Here, the church and theology are stripped of their power and relinquishes their exalted positions. The poor become the master for they know better the rough grounds they are treading on. The Church turns itself into the *ancilla* sitting at the master’s feet. In Bishop Labayen’s view, faith is not about a contest between two distinct sciences – theology and philosophy/social sciences. It is about the relationship between the church and the people. If the church and its theology find themselves in front of the poor, it can never brag to know it all. It can only sit at the feet of its master. This humble and contemplative stance of theology vis-à-vis the poor also provides a stinging critique to the instrumentalist view of both rightist and leftist theologies.

Bishop Labayen loves to tell some crucial stories of these encounters with the poor that taught him eternal lessons. For example, the mother who can offer the whole fish to the priest and his catechist who came right before lunch to her home – to the protest of her little daughter who said “*Nay, binaliktad na!*” I have heard this story long time ago. I did not know it happened in Infanta. For many, the story is a source of fun. For Bishop Labayen, it means learning at the feet of the poor: “The poor do not calculate their hospitality. They are willing to serve their guests what they have, even if it is all that they have... we of the middle class can sometimes, if not always, be calculating.”²⁰ Or, the famous story of the Agtas’ God named *Makidyepat* and many others. For Church people to effectively sit down at the feet of the poor, one

²⁰ J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 165-166.

needs to undergo “immersion” in order to acquire the “point of view” of the poor. It is only when we live with them can we little by little acquire their cherished *habitus* and *punto de vista*. “*Babad at punto de vista – itong dalawang ito and dapat na iuwi ng mga kalahok sa mga paghubog,*” the bishop continually reminds.²¹

Beyond the classical social analysis which can also turn instrumentalist is a deep spiritual conviction which is also present in the Puebla document: “that the poor are the privileged carriers of the Lord, the principal heirs of the Kingdom with a potential to evangelize all nations and the church as a whole” (Puebla, 1147). But beyond Puebla, he has learned it personally from them. Beyond technique, to sit at the feet of the poor is spirituality for it is also “to sit at the feet of Jesus.”

I am convinced of this truth not only because of what the Puebla document says about the poor. I have experienced this truth myself. Being open to them, listening to, and learning from them, I have been evangelized by the poor... To sit, therefore, at the feet of the poor is tantamount to sitting at the feet of Jesus. The poor with whom Jesus identifies himself, will evangelize us.²²

²¹ Cited in Nonong Pili, “Pangarap ng Ama,” *Julio, Itayo Mo ang Aking Simbahan*, 17; J. Labayen, “How Crucial is the Point of View,” in *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 9.

²² J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 160-162.

It is from his learning from the poor by sitting at their feet that Bishop Labayen can launch fertile and quite nuanced analyses of ideologies beyond the monochromatic views offered by mainstream church discourses.

2.2 Beyond the Left: Enlisting and Critiquing Marxism

One of the most painful experiences that Bishop Labayen underwent is to be tagged a 'communist' not only by the military establishment but by his fellow bishops. He was the "leftist Bishop" and NASSA which he headed is supposed to be infiltrated and used for other ends. He expressed this deep pain in his farewell speech at the 15th anniversary of NASSA: "I don't mind if such charges come from the non-churchmen, from oppressors – that is to be expected. But coming from the Churchmen and my brother bishops, the charges are heartbreaking. My deepest loyalty on earth is to the Church. I believe in the Church. I love the Church."²³

To divide the ideological spectrum into left and right – as the Marcos military and the majority of bishops did – misses the nuanced analysis Bishop Labayen wants to convey. In 1975, the AMRSP series entitled *Various Reports*²⁴ identified four groups of responses to the Martial Law from among church people: (a) noncritical involvement;

²³ J. Labayen, *To Be the Church of the Poor*, 127.

²⁴ "The Philippine Perspective in its Moral and Political Dimension," *Various Reports* (25 April 1975): 1-5 cited in Mario Bolasco, "The Church and the Social Question," 105-141.

(b) critical non-involvement; (c) critical; (d) total commitment. The “noncritical involvement” refers to the position of the “hardcore loyalists” of the regime identified with the group of Cardinal Julio Rosales. This group’s discourse enjoins all to obey civil authorities in the spirit of Romans 13 or alludes to the New Society as concretization of the Sermon on the Mount. “Critical non-involvement” is the moderate position which protests against some injustices in some individualist fashion without outright relating these to existing structural conditions much to violent options to redress them. Cardinal Jaime Sin’s option for “critical collaboration” has been classified under this moderate position. The third response called ‘critical position’ thinks that the Church should not only preach against injustice; it has “to organize, to work with groups, perhaps even to identify with specific social classes”. Some few progressive bishops are classified to be in this group. For instance, on November 4, 1976, seventeen bishops signed a joint letter entitled “*Ut omnes unum sint*” (That All Maybe One) in protest of the callousness of majority positions vis-à-vis the suffering of the people under Martial Law. They could not take it that while people have disappeared or are dying from violence, their annual meetings spent more time discussing about “financial matters and other trivial things.” One bishop laments: “We fiddle with trivialities while Rome burns.” Bishop Labayen was part of this loose group which called themselves the ‘critical minority’.²⁵ The fourth position are the

²⁵ The document was signed by Bishops Carmelo Morelos, Julio Labayen, Miguel Cinches, Fernando Capalla, Irineo Amantillo, Bienvenido Tuddud, Antonino Nepomuceno, Francisco Claver, Federico Esclaer, Felix Perez, Cornelius de Wit, Jesus

options of Christians whose total commitment to liberation leads “up to and including violence, if necessary.” This position refers to those who joined underground armed rebellion and those who forged alliance with Marxists as a Christian response to present injustice.

To better understand Labayen’s delicate position vis-à-vis Marxism, it would help to go back to a talk given in Ireland and India during the years 1983-1984 on the role of the Church in development and changing structures of injustice.²⁶ The main thesis of his position is this: the people’s organizations are the main actors in social change. The Church is a “free supporter”. It should not be fully identified with a particular group ‘body and soul’ because if this happens, it loses its freedom, unique charism and usefulness. Thus, according to him, “we have to be seen by the movement as their loyal friends, but we should also be able to say, ‘Hey, wait a minute, aren’t we forgetting something?’”

What of individual church members including religious, priests and bishops? What if they feel inclined to take more definite political position? Bishop Labayen does not give an easy answer. While they take specific ideological position in the name of the common good, it might be good to also consider the wisdom of the Pope’s prodding to be “unaligned”. In his peculiar interpretation of the Vatican position, he thinks that this is founded not on doctrinal and theological reasons but

Varela, Angel Hobayan, Ricardo Tancino, Miguel Furugganan, Rafael Lim and Teotimo Pacis.

²⁶ J. Labayen, *To Be the Church of the Poor*, 5-11.

on 'symbolic' one. In other words, to affiliate to the Party is not doctrinally forbidden but with it, one also loses the symbolic capital of being seen as someone solely dedicated to the Gospel and the Kingdom and not to any other human political project. "I urge priests and sisters and bishops to think seriously about this," he says.

It is here that Bishop Labayen establishes a clear distinction between *faith* (Gospel imperatives) and *science* (political project). To the Gospel and faith, one owes permanent commitment. To the political project, one can dedicate oneself only provisionally since its so-called *scientific* basis only claims validity "until contrary evidence or a better theory comes along."

What is of faith should remain a norm by which the political option is judged. I think as Christian can legitimately – theologically speaking – join the underground and a united front as long as the tension between faith and science remains. If one says they are the same or 'come down to the same thing in the end,' then he has different levels of knowledge confused. This confusion can easily arise because *much of popular Marxism is a matter of faith, and not science.*²⁷

With the above position, Labayen aligns himself with contemporary philosophies of science, e.g., Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift or Karl Popper's falsification theory – all of which thinks that

²⁷ Ibid. 10-11. [emphasis mine].

'science' is in a constant process of revolution (of paradigms) or falsification (of theories).²⁸ But with it, he has also separated himself from 'orthodox' Leninist Marxism that declares its theory as both 'scientific' and inevitable – the same doctrinaire communism on the ground that preaches itself as something proximate and inexorable. In other words, in his assessment, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has turned its ideology into a 'faith' as it required utmost obedience of its adherents. In Labayen's view, it would have been better if it remained into a practical but also falsifiable 'science'.

This critical view of the 'orthodox left' places him in a quite difficult position vis-à-vis the 'right' (Marcos dictatorship and some of his brother bishops) and the 'left' (the Party and its attendant bodies). But he does not balk at risk and ambiguity because foremost in his mind and heart is the well-being of the poor at whose feet he sits. In Labayen's view, we are the servants of the poor people first before anything else.

2.3 Beyond the Right: Toward Mixed Economies in Global Times

In more recent years, Bishop Labayen had to tackle a more insidious ideology of liberal capitalism. No different from its nemesis, i.e, orthodox Marxist-Leninism that he ruthlessly unmasked, global capitalist ideology also proclaims itself now as "the only game in town".

²⁸ Labayen referred to Popper in one of his talks. Cf. "Where did revolutions go wrong?" J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 10.

Like the classless society, the capitalist paradise is also advertised as inevitable. Francis Fukuyama, its foremost apologist, already proclaimed global capitalism and liberal democracy as the “end of history.”²⁹ In his stinging critique of globalization, Bishop Labayen has identified the tripod of stability that “ensures the interrupted operations of the global liberal capitalist system” – business/finance, diplomacy and military/intelligence.³⁰ Business/finance manages the economic and trade relations. Diplomacy takes care of political relations so that policies shall protect the economic arrangement. And the military makes sure that the economic global functioning is uninterrupted 24/7. The profit motive is the lone driving force on the road of global capital. In his analysis, if there is a menace that ravages contemporary life, it is liberal capitalism gone global as it brandishes its unchecked powers in the lives of poor communities.

But despite his scathing criticism, Labayen also does not condemn capitalism wholesale. As a student of history of both socialism and capitalism, he thinks that there are no more pure economies (neither pure capitalism nor pure socialism). He thinks that there are only “mixed economies”. He loves to tell this story.

²⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³⁰ The reflection on the ‘tripod of stability’: “Message on the Occasion of the XXVth Anniversary of the Japanese Catholic Council Justice and Peace,” New Collection, 6; idem, “Culture, Spirituality and Economic Development,” (1996), New Collection; “Church of the Poor, Where are We?” (1999), New Collection

On one occasion I was talking to an American economist. I asked him: "Tell me about economics." Knowing me he replied: "Bishop, let's face it! The health of the capitalist economy depends on greed." Because I consider him a friend I told him: "OK, friend, just keep your greed in check."³¹

If greed oils contemporary economies, it needs to be kept in check. Whatever system – capitalist or socialism – needs to borrow from each others' orientation and experience in order to help in the search for an alternative system that "ensures the promotion of the development of the *whole* human person and *all* human persons", the common good and the "earth that sustains all life." In Labayen's view, what proves central are not the ideologies but persons. Whatever in these ideological systems that can help in human promotion can be taken in; whatever obstructs shall be thrown overboard.

In the end, "to sit at the feet of the poor" does not mean to sit there forever. It is also to long and work for their well-being. His central conviction is that the poor, those who are marginalized in and by the system themselves can "check and balance the same system". They shall be empowered to achieve "enlightened conscience, organization and mobilization." Quoting Karl Popper, Labayen says: "history and its

³¹ J. Labayen, "Culture, Spirituality and Development," 9.

processes cannot, by themselves, bring about progress. *Only human beings can!*"³²

3. Judge: To Think and Feel with the Living Church

From social analysis, liberation theology's method proceeds to hermeneutic mediation. As Christians, we are asked to judge/discern our situation from the vision and principles of the Scriptures, the whole of Christian tradition and the Church. As a theologian, Bishop Labayen is faithful to this invitation. In this part, we reflect on how he perceives his relationship with the Church and what spirituality ensues from this relationship.

3.1 *Sentire cum Ecclesia* in Context

It is well-known that Bishop Labayen's "pastoral guiding star" is the motto *sentire cum ecclesia* (to feel with the Church). The phrase has been attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola in the Spiritual Exercises. Though this phrase can be used to curb voices from the below and enforce almost blind obedience to the hierarchy as is usually done by Roman documents,³³ the phrase is in fact impoverished if it is restricted

³² J. Labayen, "Message on the Occasion of the XXVth Anniversary of the Japanese Catholic Council Justice and Peace," 7 [emphasis his].

³³ Cf. "Actually, the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply identified with the 'sensus fidei'. The sense of the faith is a property of theological faith; and, as God's gift which enables one to adhere personally to the Truth, it cannot err. This personal faith is also the faith of the Church since God has given guardianship

to it. Even St. Ignatius who used the word ‘hierarchical’ to describe the church does not only refer to “the world of popes and bishops, ecclesiastics and clergy.”³⁴ What Ignatius had in mind was a living Church with strong and weak members (1Cor. 12: 18-26), thus, to feel with the Church does not primarily mean to tow the line of the hierarchy but to feel the pains of its weak members.

Bishop Labayan’s inspiration – *sentire cum ecclesia* – directly came from his fellow Carmelite and teacher at the Collegio Santa Teresa in Rome, Fr. Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen during a recollection in 1952.³⁵ Fr. Gabriel (1893-1953) was a Belgian Carmelite who was then a distinguished professor in spiritual theology and Carmelite spirituality. He also founded the magazine *Vita Carmelitana*, which from 1947 onwards became the *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*. When Bro.

of the Word to the Church. Consequently, what the believer believes is what the Church believes. The ‘*sensus fidei*’ implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, ‘*sentire cum Ecclesia*.’” Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, *Donum Veritatis: The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 35 in http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html (10.10.2013).

³⁴ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “The Rules for Thinking, Judging, Feeling in the Post-Conciliar Church,” (Opening Address in the Rome Consultation 2004) in <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/cis/pdfenglish/105padregen.pdf> (10.10.2013).

³⁵ “The phrase *sentire cum ecclesia* struck me when I was in first year theology, 1952, in Collegio S. Teresa in Rome... The occasion was a monthly recollection where the saintly Father Gabriel of Sainte Marie Madeleine, OCD preached with irresistible fervor. His faith and love for the church was inspiring and set my heart on fire for the church who is both Mother and Teacher. We show our filial devotion and trust in her maternal care and concern for us by living up to her social teaching.” J. Labayan, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 7.

*Xavier arrived in Rome for theological studies, Fr. Gabriel just published his popular book Divine Intimacy.*³⁶ The year after, he died.

Since the text of that recollection is not accessible to us, I browsed through the book in our library to look for some connections. On the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Fr. Gabriel offers a reflection to awaken “a greater love for the Church and for our Holy Father the Pope”.

Rightly, then, should we consider the Feast of St Peter as the Feast of the Church, the Feast of our Holy Father the Pope, and one which should awaken in every Christian soul a profound sense of belonging to the Church and of devotion to the Sovereign Pontiff. At the moment of her death, St Teresa of Jesus repeated: “I am a daughter of the Church!” After having laboured so much for God and souls, this was the only title that made her sure of the divine mercy. To be a child of the Church! This is our title to salvation, this is our glory, after that of being a child of God. Or rather, not *after*, but *together with*, for, as the Fathers of the Church say, “He cannot have God for Father who does not have the Church for Mother” (St Cyprian). He is not a true Catholic who does not feel the joy of being a child of the Church, whose heart does not vibrate for the Church and for the Vicar of Christ upon earth, who is not ready to renounce his own personal views in order to “*sentire cum*

³⁶ Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, *Divine Intimacy: Meditations on the Interior Life for Every Day of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Desclee, 1964), 1136-1139.

Ecclesia", to think with the Church, always and in all things.³⁷

Product as he is of Tridentine ecclesiological language, there seems to be a close identification between the Pope and the Church, as if one is co-terminus with the other. Fr. Gabriel also situates Teresa of Avila along the same tradition through a statement so closely associated with Carmelite spirituality: "I am a daughter of the Church."³⁸ However, there is an almost unrecognizable shift in Fr. Gabriel's reflection as he continued:

Whoever you may be – priest or lay person, religious or father of a family, simple Christian or humble nun, you also are called to support the Church, just as in a building, not only the big blocks of granite, but also the smallest bricks help to solidify the whole edifice... she suffers in her children, abandoned and dispersed like sheep without a shepherd. And you, her child, can you remain indifferent? Suffer with your Mother; pray, work and use your strength to serve and defend her. Lay aside your own little personal interests and consecrate yourself – your life, your works, your

³⁷ Ibid., 1137.

³⁸ Bishop Labayen also reads Teresa along this direction: "Truly, Teresa identified herself with the thinking and feeling of a living Church. Today she would spontaneously and gladly identify with the Church of the Poor." Cf. J. Labayen, "The Carmelites and Mission," New Collection, 1-6.

prayers, your silent, hidden sacrifices – to the great interests of the Church.³⁹

It is this sensibility to the suffering children that challenged the young Bro. Xavier to consecrate himself to the same Church and suffer with this Mother to the end. And suffered he did! In the specific context that Bishop Labayen read it, *sentire cum ecclesia* becomes polyvalent and takes on surplus meanings. Beyond just “feeling with the Church”, *sentire* also means “thinking and understanding” the changing nature and mission of the church in the modern world. Beyond mere fidelity to the *institutional* church, it also refers to one’s fidelity to “the living church” – a church enlivened by the Risen Lord, reading the signs of the times, abiding by a pastoral method that is socio-historical, psycho-theological, interdisciplinary, ecological and global method.⁴⁰ Moreover, such a church takes on the special predilection for the poor – the “smallest bricks” – to use the words of Fr. Gabriel in *Divine Intimacy*.

This initial inspiration of a young theology student in Rome has also guided the options of the young parish priest in Polillo, the long-standing President of NASSA and the Bishop of the Prelature of Infanta. It was severely tested, however, during the most challenging time in the life of the Prelature. Much has been said of the “walk out” during Pastoral Conference III of 1983 in Dinalungan. What caught my

³⁹ Ibid., 1138.

⁴⁰ J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 85.

attention is how Bishop Labayen enfleshed in that specific instance what *sentire cum ecclesia* means in the real rough grounds. Beyond the military harassment and ecclesiastical pressure of the right, on the one hand, and the urgings of the left, on the other, Bishop Labayen stood his ground among the poor – the living Church with whom he thinks and feels with. His narration is quite powerful.

Hindi rin ligtas ang Prelatura sa ganitong tensyong dulot ng Batas Militar at Military Black Propaganda. Sa loob ng kaparian, umiiral sa mga relihiyoso ang pagdududa at pagkalito.

Ito ang kalagayan ng simbahan at lipunan noong idaos ang seminar sa Dinalungan bilang karugtong ng mga paghahanda sa Ikatlong Pastoral Conference (PC III) ng Prelatura ng Infanta. Napakataas ng mga tensyon at tunggalian sa kaparian, relihiyoso at layko noong panahong ito na nahahati sa ‘kaliwa’ at ‘kanan’. Naipit ako sa magkabilang panig, at may nagtanong sa akin: “Bishop saan kayo panig? Saan kayo nakatayo?”

Mahinahon at matatag akong sumagot: “Sinabi ko na sa inyo sa maraming pagkakataon kung saan ako panig. Ngayon, uulitin ko. Kung nasaan ang simbahan buháy, doon ako nakatayo. Hanapin ninyo ako at ako ay naroon!”⁴¹

⁴¹ *Julio, Itayo Mo ang Aking Simbahan*, 3.

3.2 Incarnational Spirituality in the Church of the Poor

The living *Ecclesia* with which we need to think and feel with does not exist for itself. It exists for 'the world', for the cosmos, for the Kingdom. This point is impressed in the mind of Bishop Labayen through the question Cardinal Kim of Korea asked during the Synod on Evangelization in 1974: "*Ecclesia, pro sua vita aut pro mundi?*" (Is the Church for itself or for the world?).⁴² In that article hastily written the night before a Bangkok conference in 1978, Bishop Labayen talks of the "Father's dream" that should consume the church the way Jesus did. Crucial to the Father's dream is the human person's well-being. Close to his heart is St. Irenaeus' famous phrase: "*Gloria Dei, vivens homo*" (The glory of God is man and woman fully human, fully alive."⁴³ In other words, we do not exist for ourselves; we exist to make others live life to the full. The church is not self-referential; it must work for the realization of the Kingdom of God. The vision that captured his imagination was from the Book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... Now, God's home is with mankind. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, there will be no more grief, of crying, or pain" (Rev. 21: 1, 3-5). Spirituality thus means to be like Christ – "to lay down our lives – as His body – that the world may live". For the kingdom to come, Bishop Labayen suggests that we go beyond economics to politics, from politics to the human spirit. He believes the

⁴² J. Labayen, "The Father's Dream," *To Be the Church of the Poor*, 1- 11.

⁴³ Nonong Pili, "Pangarap ng Ama," in *Julio, Itayo Mo ang Aking Simbahan*, 12.

human spirit is not sufficient unto itself. Thus, “in the light of our faith, the fullness of the human spirit and the human heart will be attained – thanks to the gift of the spirit of Jesus.”

In more recent articles, the theme of the ‘human spirit’ emerges again but with a different accent. While the earlier directions talks of the spirit of Jesus as completing our human spirits, the later conferences reflect on the ‘human spirit’ as self-transcendence, as a drive and search for meaning, as unconditional self-giving.⁴⁴ From the “Father’s dream”, the emphasis now shifts to the continual pursuit of the “Impossible Dream” and the “unreachable star”. I really think that these are the same concepts expressed in new terms. Maybe there is a little shift in emphasis. Thus, maybe for mere didactic purpose and quite mindful of the risk of oversimplification, we can also think that the previous version is “descending” – starting from the “Father’s dream”; and the later direction is “ascending” – starting from the infinite self-transcendence of the human spirit. Wherever one starts, they are bound to meet somewhere.

The suggestion of a shift in discourse is also consistent with the shift he himself suggests – from *institutional* spirituality to *incarnational* spirituality. “By incarnational spirituality we mean the life of our human spirit, our human heart that is situated and rooted in human flesh.”⁴⁵ He explains further: “The shift from the perspective of the institution to the perspective of the basic humanity leads us to

⁴⁴ J. Labayen, “Have Less, Be More,” New Collection, 1-15.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

discover anew and afresh that God as Creator belongs, in truth, to all peoples with their respective ethnic identity, their culture, their religion.”⁴⁶ If spirituality starts from the longings of the human spirit, that is, from what is deeply human in us, this view can have serious consequences to our lifestyle, worship and mission. To illustrate this, Bishop Labayen tells the story of a religious community who wanted to pull out her sisters from the mission areas because “they are not living anymore as a community; they do not say together their common prayers.” To which the bishop asks: “Sister, just what do you mean by living in community? Is it simply to live habitually under one roof?”⁴⁷ The rhetorical question was meant to deconstruct the traditional notion of ‘community life’ when we let go of the institutional spirituality framework. For the vision of the Kingdom is beyond our myopic ecclesial concerns. The church has never been coterminous the Kingdom.

It is here that one can locate the foundations of Labayen’s theology of interreligious dialogue. As a theologian, he still uses theological frames to communicate his emerging insights: “After thirty-three years of pastoral ministry I feel I have solved my dilemma... The theological foundations are solid: the creation, the mystery of incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and Pentecost.”⁴⁸ But his

⁴⁶ J. Labayen, “Church of the Poor – Infanta Experience (Basic Christian Communities),” 15.

⁴⁷ J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 141.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 130

interpretations of them are such that those belonging to other religions, indigenous peoples, the unchurched and all those in the fringes of church and society – most of whom are poor – can authentically live spirituality in their own contexts. He reread these central themes of the faith in order to find an inclusive spirituality for all. Starting with creation, we are all endowed with transcending spirits as we are all created in God's image and likeness. One recalls here Rahner's "supernatural existential" or Lonergan's "dynamism of human consciousness". For Labayen, this dynamism of the human spirit is what spirituality is all about. What is crucial to the Incarnation is not so much the Son of God coming down to save us (which is still the source of the deep mystery) but His unity with all and every human being. Central to this affirmation is a line from *Gaudium et Spes*: "By his incarnation, the Son of God united himself, in a certain manner, with each and every human being" (GS 22). "Therefore, I find it obvious that every human being who is born into this world enjoys an existential and dynamic relationship with his/her Creator and Savior."⁴⁹ This view of the Christian tradition from the perspective of incarnational spirituality is meant to lead us toward a reverential attitude for different path of others where God has also trodden. And, such an inclusive view of revelation is very crucial to the vision of the Church of the Poor.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

My dilemma as a young neophyte priest is finally resolved. And my pastoral instinct is at peace. The Church that I do not only believe, but above all, do love is indeed to me now as I have always cherished her to be: a concerned and caring Mother and zealous and assiduous Teacher of all peoples. She is the caring mother who gives preferential attention and care for her sick and needy children.⁵⁰

4. Act: To Take Paths and Risks the Poor Take

It is not possible to summarize all the pastoral activities that Bishop Labayen has engaged in. I would only reflect on two of his main engagements: social action and Basic Christian Communities. In this part, I would like to highlight the originality of his insights as these lines of action do not come from armchair reflection but from his sitting “at the feet of the poor” and “feeling and thinking with the living Church.” These and his other engagements are a lifelong response to his challenge made to a group of Sisters in 1979: “To be the Church of the poor means to be with the poor, to side with them, to struggle with them, to take the paths and risks they take.”⁵¹

4.1 Varieties of Social Action

⁵⁰ J. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 143-144.

⁵¹ J. Labayen, “Sisters and Social Action,” *To be the Church of the Poor*, 46.

Social action was one field that Bishop Labayen dedicated a great part of his life – a good fifteen (15) years. For a personal account of these fruitful years, one can refer to his farewell speech as he left – or according to him “was eased out” of – NASSA in 1981.⁵² He left them with some reflections on the spirituality for social action and ideology. But what caught my attention is a talk he delivered two years earlier in Japan entitled “Variety of Social Action” (1979).⁵³

What plagues social action practitioners is the exclusive view of their works and approaches consequently criticizing or condemning the projects and approaches of others, at worst; or talking about them in condescending manner, at best. On the one hand, traditional works of mercy like orphanages, hospitals, soup-kitchens are seen as ‘dole-outs’ and as treating only the symptoms not the cause. On the other hand, those working for social change in the realm of politics are also derided as forgetting the respect for individual freedoms and human rights in their preoccupation with the coming of the new world. Yet, all of these are supposed to be motivated by the Gospel. Bishop Labayen asks: “How can one Gospel create such variety [and animosity]?”

- a. If you believe that society’s structures are fine and working for the good of all, then you will not worry about them, and you will be content to take care of the

⁵² J. Labayen, “Fifteen Years in Social Action,” *To be the Church of the Poor*, 125-135.

⁵³ J. Labayen, “Variety in Social Action,” *To be the Church of the Poor*, 83-89.

sick and orphaned (e.g., hospitals, orphanages, asylums, etc.)

- b. If you think society's structures are essentially good, but need some improvement, then you are liable to start mini-structures to assist the larger structures (credit unions, cooperatives, housing projects, etc.)
- c. If you think society's structures are basically unjust, you will start strong people's organization or strong labor unions which will be able to struggle hard and force changes in overall structures.
- d. If you think a society's structures are hopelessly unjust and beyond saving, you become a revolutionary.⁵⁴

What Labayen accomplished in this paper is to urge people to level-off in their analysis of the causes of poverty before plunging into action. Moreover, he has contextualized and relativized different positions so as to be able to accept pluralism and means – one which is not so common among highly organized institutions both from the left and the right. The autonomous Cartesian *cogito* has dominated philosophy from Descartes onwards. It is only in postmodernity that this monologic march of reason has been put into question. The advance of capitalism obliterates cultures and communities from the Industrial Revolution to the digital age. Orthodox Marxism is no different, as we have already shown. It is only in recent decades that

⁵⁴ Ibid., 87-88.

post-structuralist and post-Marxist philosophers argue for pluralism and difference.

Yet at a time when orthodox Leninist-Maoism in the Philippines was at the height of its popularity and made its hegemonic dominance felt during the Martial Law, Bishop Labayen already stood up for plurality and diversity. Again, what saved him from straightjacket ideologies is the “human person” whom the church needs to serve. He does not fail to remind: “We must constantly reassess our work to make sure we are really serving God’s poor.”⁵⁵

4.2 Basic Ecclesial Communities

Much has been said and written on the Basic Ecclesial Communities as new way of being Church in the Philippines. Bishop Labayen himself has shared extensively on BECs based on his experience in the Prelature of Infanta as a concrete expression of the Church of the Poor. A very helpful personal narrative is his article entitled “Church of the Poor – Infanta Experience (Basic Ecclesial Communities)” written in 1996 – around twenty years after he started with social programs for the poor in the Prelature.⁵⁶ Beyond the Prelature of Infanta, another useful article that traces the development of the BECs in the Church and in the Philippines read in new contexts is

⁵⁵ Ibid. 89.

⁵⁶ J. Labayen, “Church of the Poor – Infanta Experience (Basic Ecclesial Communities),” New Collection, 1-15.

entitled “The Church and the BECs in the New Millennium”.⁵⁷ While I was reading through these texts, one can sense a man “who has been through it all” – as the trite English expression goes. As Bishop Labayen looks back, he also continues to reflect where the Spirit leads next. Let me mention some recognizable developments in these areas.

First, while it is true that BCCs started as groups of Christians in proximate geographical units (in the sense of *kapitbahayan*), Bishop Labayen also recognizes other models that “aim at bringing together certain groups of people who are linked by age, culture, civil state or social condition, such as married couples, the young, the professional, for the purpose of listening to, and meditating on the Word of God, and of the celebration and reception of the Sacraments.”⁵⁸ One can easily think of Couples for Christ, the Feast, covenanted communities, etc. He also recognized other structures like some Christian groups in certain areas not reachable by priests. There have been discussions in pastoral circles whether these are considered BECs or ecclesial movements. In this opening made by Bishop Labayen, one can argue for a more pluralist interpretation of what the BCC or BEC is all about.

Second, he thinks that BECs should be open to working in solidarity with peoples’ movements. The politics in the change of name from BCCs to BECs is known to us. The distinction, however, does not

⁵⁷ J. Labayen, “The 30th Anniversary of Basic Christian Communities in the Philippines,” (1998) New Collection; “The Church and BECs in the New Millennium,” New Collection.

⁵⁸ J. Labayen, “The Church and BECs in the New Millennium,” New Collection, 12.

feature prominently in the discourses of Bishop Labayen. He uses both terms interchangeably. For him, if BECs shall “remain, be nurtured at, and grow” in the bosom of the Church as Pope Paul VI urged, it shall also be radically open to all people of good will – “those who are not part of the Basic Christian Communities, and want to build a more human world.”⁵⁹ Beyond a purely intra-ecclesial program which characterizes many BECs today, it is enjoined to open its doors to many groups of people, most of whom are non-Catholics, non-Christians some coming from different ideological persuasions, who also aspire for a just and human world. Many forms of this open collaboration abound. For instance, the FABC documents talk about Basic Human Communities. This is not new to the Prelature of Infanta which has engaged the organized sectors ever since in the crafting of the vision and programs of their BECs. The regular meetings and established ground rules make possible a common engagement of bringing about a better world at the same time respecting religious, gender, cultural uniqueness.

Third, we have seen how Bishop Labayen defended the use of Marxist social analysis in the Church as he was also critical about it. In more recent articles, he revisits it and is not afraid to ask difficult questions. He remembered some of his co-workers in the social field were burnt out. “Some went somersault,” he said. “They eventually joined the very capitalist institutions they were zealously criticizing and fighting before. The more clever ones became executives of these

⁵⁹ Ibid, 13.

institutions... What went wrong with these committed people: priests, religious and laity?" And Bishop Labayen is not afraid to advance his honest answer.

[These] well meaning activists put their hand to the missionary task of the church banking overly on social analysis and its corresponding strategy and tactics. What they perhaps unwittingly downplayed, in the process, was the role that spirituality had to play in this task... Perhaps, the dialectical materialism of Marx conditioned them to put aside the transcendent dimension of his own humanity, let alone their faith in Jesus-Christ.⁶⁰

For Bishop Labayen, this is not an outright condemnation of Marxism and its adherents. One can remember his deep appreciation for the witness of Fr. Frank Navarro of Tandag diocese who was killed in a military encounter while travelling to inform the NPA to keep from harm's way as the military were approaching. "I humbly salute Fr. Navarro for his Catholic sense of priesthood and pastoral ministry for his personal testimony to the social and communitarian dimension of authentic Christianity in its entirety, and his revolutionary spirit to renew the face of the earth. If Latin America has its Camilo Torres, the Philippines has its Frank Navarro."⁶¹

⁶⁰ J. Labayen, "The 30th Anniversary of Basic Christian Communities in the Philippines," 4.

⁶¹ J. Labayen, *Revolution and The Church of the Poor*, 155.

What is crucial for him is the transformation of the human person from within regardless of one's ideological affiliation. I can discern a basic question in all his writings: how are our lives lived – for ourselves or for others and God? Let me quote him extensively as I feel that these words come from the depths of his heart.

I came to my last query: “In their zeal, what was their heart bent on? On self? Or on the living and saving God of history? In other words, “What was the disposition of their heart? Did they pay attention to the subtle and deep aspiration of their human heart? Did they call on the Spirit of the Risen Lord to purify their heart and so be united with the Lord to the point of dying on the cross for the sake of the victims of injustice, greed and avarice of this world? Did they rather not attempt to do by themselves alone the Herculean task of taking on the powers of darkness and evil without the light and sanctity of the Savior?

I came finally to one simple conclusion. There is no genuine and lasting qualitative change unless the change comes from a heart that is converted to, and united with God... Revolutions failed because they did not have a heart. The heart of the revolution is the revolution of the heart.⁶²

⁶² J. Labayan, “The 30th Anniversary of Basic Christian Communities in the Philippines,” New Collection 4-5.

5. By Way of Conclusion: And his garment is covered with dust

In order to end, let me go to his Episcopal motto: *Dominus est!* “It is the Lord” (John 21:7). It was John the Beloved who recognized the Risen Lord in the Sea of Galilee after they have caught a great number of fish.

Bishop Labayen also recognized the Lord – not after a large catch. He recognized the Lord among the poor – farmers, laborers, fisherfolks – even as there was yet nothing, even if it was just the hard ground and breaking stones in the scorching heat or the cold rain. He recognized Him even if “his garment is covered with dust”.

That is why I quoted Tagore in the beginning of this paper as Bishop Labayen also used the same verse somewhere.⁶³

*Open your eyes, and see that God
is not in front of you
He is there where the farmer is tilling
the hard ground
And where the laborer is breaking the stones
He is with them in the sun and the rain
and his garment is covered with dust.*

⁶³ J. Labayen, “Fifteen Years of Social Action,” *To Be the Church of the Poor*, 128.

