

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) launched the preparation for the celebration of the Fifth Centenary of the arrival of Christianity in the country, with the culminating activity programmed for March 2021.¹ Under the general themes of faith and evangelization and as a response to the "call of the Spirit to a New Evangelization," the CBCP proposed key themes for reflection and pertinent activities over a nine-year period. Since 2013, these have focused on the integral formation of the laity, the poor, the family, the parish, the clergy and religious, and more recently, the youth. For 2020 the theme chosen for exploration and conversation is **ecumenism and interreligious dialogue**. This was envisioned as a prelude to a renewed commitment to the Church's "mission," the over-arching theme for 2021.

The progression of the annual themes points to a two-pronged approach. The first is preparation and in-depth catechesis of various sectors within the Catholic Church in the Philippines. On the penultimate year, however, the focus is on the relationship between the Catholic Church and others who share our Christian faith as well as those of different faiths. Specifically for the 2020 theme on Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue, this is what the CBCP had in mind:

"Different faiths and religions are a formidable challenge to a nation that strives to be a community, a human family, a unity in diversity. This year will be devoted to exploring new ways of being community through ecumenical and inter-religious relationships and action. *Caritas in veritate*, open, honest, respectful -

¹ CBCP Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization, LIVE CHRIST, SHARE CHRIST, by Most Rev. Jose Palma, D.D., President CBCP, 2012 July 23.

loving – dialogue of life, prayer and action is the only way towards community. At stake are the great values of peace and harmony, particularly in areas of armed conflict, solidarity in the struggle for social change, unity in healing social ills, integrity and social justice in our land.”

In relation to the five hundred-year history of the Christian faith in the Philippines, some may regard the themes of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue as comparatively recent, having been formally raised only in the second half of the twentieth century at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Yet, in truth these have been in one way or another at the heart of the Church’s concerns through the years. In particular this was because the Catholic Church has existed in the country side by side with groups that have moved away from the institutional church and formed their own brand of Christianity. One can think, for example, of the Philippine Independent Church (under the group of Gregorio Aglipay) which gained traction almost around the same time as the eruption of the fervor for Philippine independence from the Spanish colonizers, towards the end of the 19th century. Moreover, one may take note that a number of Protestant denominations arrived during the American regime in the first half of the 20th century. But it is a fact that the Catholic Church in the Philippines has always co-existed with our Muslim brothers and sisters, as far back as at the time of the arrival of the Spanish missionaries. At the same time, as a country in Asia, the Philippines’ religious culture remains rooted in and has consistently shown characteristics of indigenous practices as well as subtle influences of the great Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. All this simply points to the persistently “inter-religious” make-up of the Filipino nation, and its “variously-Christian” character. This is not to say that ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council have taken place before their emergence as theological and pastoral themes in this great Council. But one can argue that the germ of both ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue have already been planted in this country, although perhaps we may not have fully adverted to it before the 1960’s as much as we have done since then.

In this issue of HAPAG, the theme of dialogue in religious traditions is explored both from a wider lens as well as from specific historical and ethnic perspectives. The articles range from a broader presentation of the contemporary context of dialogue with religion, its scriptural moorings, to detailed reflection on actual dialogue among various religious groups responding to the challenges of political involvement and indigenous specificity. Two of these articles (Trinidad and Romero) were presented at the November 2019 DaKaTeo Conference on the Significance of the 500th Year of Catholicism in the Philippines from the Perspective of Indigenous People.

Tuazon starts by mapping the re-emergence of religious traditions as legitimate dialogue partner to contemporary approaches. But rather than following the paths of Vattimo's nihilistic-kenotic approach and Milbank-Hauerwas's exaltation of theological perspective, he offers a more liberative and transformative approach along the lines of Pope Francis, influenced by both Enrique Dussel and Emmanuel Levinas' appreciation of the "other." He argues that such an approach is rooted in the examples of prophets and mystics, persons who have shown how contemplative reflection could easily find an actively prophetic expression.

Grounding dialogue in the rich tradition of the Church is something that Fortes and Belita do as well, as they tackle examples of dialogue in the very actions of Christ himself. Fortes points out how Jesus goes beyond stereotypical pluralism when he challenges both Jews and Samaritans to redefine their ethnic identities. Doing so, Fortes argues, not only respects cultural differences but also enables one to identify possible marginalization of some ethnicity. Belita, for his part, takes the story of the "outside-exorcist" (Mk 9:38-41) as an illustration of how Jesus himself debunks the 'monopolistic' tendency of the disciples who claimed the power of exorcising the evil spirit as inherently theirs. He uses this as a potent model of how present-day ecumenical dialogue could proceed, in humble recognition of the variety of charisms that the Spirit showers upon those who believe. This in fact is at the heart of Jesus' mission of bringing God's kingdom in this world.

Using mission as the focus of his article, Capucao explores the matter of inter-religious dialogue and how different approaches to mission can push forward this initiative. He first examines the mission concepts among the Evangelical Christians, particularly in the core documents of the Lausanne Covenant and Manila Manifesto. In a second part, he delves into concepts of mission in the Buddhist tradition and critiques both ‘oppressive and liberating’ dimensions in them. His conclusion offers valuable suggestions on areas where inter-religious dialogue could effectively proceed.

Mission is also taken up by Trinidad. Here he presents a historical account of how Filipino missionaries of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) carried on the mission in Guatemala at the height of the civil war (1960-1996). He elaborates on how, like their people and other fellow missionaries, they responded to the call to embrace fully the lot and suffering of their people. In a way, this illustrates the difficulty in pursuing dialogue with those people of other persuasions, particularly with those who seek political domination instead.

In a similar narration, Simbulan recounts the experience of religious groups in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986). Drawing from first-hand experiences, he paints the picture of an ecumenical experience that brought Protestants and Catholics alike to register their firm opposition to the Marcos regime. This inter-religious engagement even brought the protagonists to an open dialogue with some Marxist elements as well as with other progressive patriots, all in an effort to proclaim the prophetic and liberating role of believers in the face of nationwide injustice and oppression. This article gives expression to CBCP’s aspiration for religious dialogue to blossom into “solidarity in the struggle for social change, unity in healing social ills, integrity and social justice in our land.”

Finally, Romero’s take on an indigenous (Ma-aram) tradition explores the different possibilities of dialogue with indigenous experience. In this context, she believes that acknowledging the role of the ‘babaylan’ in the institution and community of their people could be decisive in interreligious

dialogue and even in the manner of presenting Christian doctrines to ethnic groups.

Dialogue among religious groups remain a formidable task, what with the growing appreciation of “difference” in today’s global environment being given pre-eminence. Yet, for any believer this is a challenge that must be continually faced head-on because Christ’s mission to bring the gospel to the world remains the key to meaningful human existence for all.

Manuel Ginete

maanuelginetecm@gmail.com