

ENVIRONMENTAL PRAXIS OF BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES: AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Reflecting on the successful anti-logging campaign of the BECs of San Fernando, Bukidnon, the author makes use of the PCP II vision of a renewed Church – the Church as Community of Disciples living in Communion, participating in the mission of Christ as prophetic, priestly and kingly/servant people as the Church of the Poor – as an ecclesiological framework for understanding and justifying the environmental praxis of the BECs. This involves a broader and more relevant interpretation of the meaning and implication of this ecclesial vision which can spur the Church in general and the BECs in particular to be more vigorously involved in the struggle for the integrity of creation.

From the middle of 1987 to the end of 1988, I was part of the Redemptorist Mission Team that helped educate, organize and mobilize the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) of San Fernando against the logging companies that were destroying the forests of Bukidnon. After two years of struggle, the Aquino government ordered a total log ban in the province and asked the neighboring communities to help in the reforestation project of the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources. The clergy and BEC leaders of Bukidnon were also deputized to go after illegal loggers.

That was the first time that BECs in collaboration with some People's Organizations were involved in the ecology issue under the new democratic government. Through the years, some BECs continued to be involved in the efforts to defend the integrity of creation throughout the country. Redemptorist Mission Teams and communities in Mindanao and Visayas continued to help mobilize BECs against dam projects, mining operations, Coal-Fired Power Plant project and aerial spraying.

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The National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA) has also been promoting sustainable agriculture and livelihood projects that respect the integrity of creation in various dioceses, parishes and BECs. The BEC national assemblies and gatherings have constantly promoted the ecology thrust for BECs.

In promoting the ecological thrust of BECs, the question that comes up is: What theological framework can motivate and justify the involvement of BECs in the environmental issue? This is the question that I would like to address in this paper.

The first part contains the narrative section which tells the story of the struggle of the BECs of San Fernando, Bukidnon. This will consist of the poem “The Epic of San Fernando” which I wrote years ago. The second part is the systematic theological section that seeks to explore the ecclesiological framework that provides the basis for conscientizing and mobilizing the BECs to participate in the efforts to defend the integrity of creation.

The Story of the Basic Ecclesial Communities of San Fernando, Bukidnon

Theology is not just a speculative and abstract thinking about God or divinely revealed truths. It is first and foremost based on stories of people’s experience of God’s liberating presence in history. Such stories are preserved in the Sacred Scriptures. But there are stories that continue to be told today – for God continues to be present and active in the lives and struggles of people in our time. This is the story of the BECs of San Fernando.¹

The Epic of San Fernando

*We are poor peasants,
living in small Christian communities
in a remote valley of San Fernando, Bukidnon.
We have lived amidst violence - the violence of poverty,*

1. For a detailed account cf. Karl Gaspar, *A People’s Option: To Struggle for Creation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990) and Amado Picardal et al. *Being Sent: Redemptorist Missions in Mindanao* (1975-2005) (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 2005), 85-110.

*of a guerrilla war, of the destruction of our environment,
and the violence of the military.
But we have walked the way of peace - the way of the cross,
and have experienced its liberating power.
This is our story.*

*There was a time
when the mountains were green
and the river was blue.
The heavy rains did not flood our farms
Nor did the long hot summer parch the land.*

*That was before the logging companies came.
They were owned by the politicians and protected by soldiers.
We watched helplessly as the trucks passed by
carrying away the logs to be shipped to foreign lands.*

*We signed petitions asking the government
to stop the loggers from turning our land into a desert
and our river into a highway.
But we never got any response.*

*Then the Redemptorist Mission Team came
Composed of priests, brothers, nuns and lay missionaries.
They lived among us and worked with us
to build Christian communities.
In our nipa huts late at night,
and in our bamboo chapels on Sundays
we came together to reflect on our situation
and the Word of God
We realized that to be true Christians
it was not enough to worship and to read the Bible.
We have to care for others and care for the earth.
We have to defend the forest - which is our home,
the home of our neighbors - the native Dumagats and Subanons,
the home of the birds, the animals and the wild plants.*

*The day came when we gathered
on the road where the logging trucks pass.
There were hundreds of us -
men, women, children and old people.
We barricaded the road with our bodies*

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*and the logging trucks could no longer pass.
It was like a fiesta. We sang and danced,
we shared our food with one another
and with the loggers who were stranded.
It was a real communion.
The priests, the brothers, nuns
and lay missionaries were with us.
Even the Bishop- Gaudencio Rosales- came one night to pray with us.
They listened to us when we shared with them our stories
and our reflections on the Word of God
and on the unfolding event.
It was our turn to proclaim and witness the Gospel.*

*Those who did not join us taunted us.
They said that we will never succeed.
We were poor, powerless and few
and we were up against rich businessmen
and powerful politicians
who were protected by the military
and who could bribe the corrupt judges.*

*On the thirteenth day in the barricade
while celebrating the Eucharist with Fr. Pat, our parish priest,
a truckload of soldiers came carrying an order
from the judge to disperse us.
They beat us without mercy.
They did not spare the old people and the pregnant women.
They even beat the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
We did not resist them. We turned the other cheek.
While they kept on beating us, we sang the "Our Father"
with tears in our eyes.
When they brought our parish priest to the camp
we also went with him.
We told the soldiers that if they will imprison him
they will also have to imprison all of us.
They finally told all of us to go home with our priest.
We went back to the side of the road that we used to barricade
and watched helplessly as the logging trucks passed by.
We prayed and cried. We were defeated.
It was our Good Friday.
The sky darkened and the heavens wept with us unceasingly.*

*It rained day and night for a couple of weeks.
And the river rose and the overflowing waters dashed against the bridge
where all the logging trucks pass.
And the bridge collapsed.
And the road leading up to the logging camp was blocked by a landslide.
The logging operations were stopped.
Nature continued the barricade for us.
When we gathered the following night to pray
on the side of the road where the logging trucks used to pass.
we all praised and thanked God who has not abandoned us.*

*A few weeks later we were ordered to appear
in court before the judge.
We filled the courtroom - men, women, children, old people.
We were not afraid even if we were poor and powerless
because we believed that God's Spirit was with us.
We were charged with violating the law
and causing the logging companies huge loss of profits.
They wanted twelve million pesos for damages.
The judge scolded us as if we were naughty children
and set the date for our trial.
We knew that the judge was on the side of the loggers.
Our main worry was where to get that huge amount of money
to pay the loggers if we lose the case.*

*Meanwhile, the newspapers, the TV and radio reported our story.
The conscience of many all over the country was awakened.
They realized that our problem was also their problem.
Many began to show their support.*

*Our voice was beginning to be heard
and finally, President Cory Aquino
ordered a stop to the logging operations in San Fernando.*

*When we heard the good news
our tears of sorrow became tears of joy.
Our suffering had not been in vain.
We thanked God by celebrating the Eucharist
and by having an instant fiesta.
It was our Easter Sunday.
When we went back to the courtroom
The judge reluctantly dropped all charges against us.*

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*A few months later a pastoral letter of the Bishops' Conference
was read in all the Catholic churches
and chapels all over the archipelago.
It spoke about the ecological crisis in our country.
And it mentioned the struggle of the people of San Fernando
as a sign of hope and as an example for all.
We could not believe that we in our insignificance
and powerlessness can make a difference.*

*Our story and our struggle should have ended then.
But it did not.
One year later we discovered
that while the logging had stopped in San Fernando
it continued in the neighboring mountains.
We realized that even if it happened in other places
we would be affected because we were all connected.*

*And so we found ourselves once again in the barricade
far away from home - in the provincial capital.
This time we were more numerous
because the people from the neighboring areas joined us.
We wanted the logging to be stopped
in the entire province of Bukidnon.
At first we pitched our tents outside the office
of the Department of Natural Resources.
They just ignored us.
And on the fifth day we transferred to the checkpoint
in the national highway where all the logging trucks
usually stop for inspection.
We took over the place and set up a human barricade.
And all the logging trucks could no longer get through.*

*The soldiers came and they could not disperse us.
The truck drivers tried to drive through the barricade.
Some of us placed some spikes on the road
and when one truck tried to run us down
the tires were punctured and the truck with the logs
almost turned over.
We were filled with remorse realizing that
the driver could have been hurt or killed.*

*Once again the newspapers, radio and TV reported our story.
Finally, Fulgencio Factoran -
the Secretary of the Department of Energy and Natural Resources-
heeded our request for a dialogue.
He was sent by the President to meet with us.
After listening to us he granted most of our demands.
He told us that the logging in the neighboring mountains and
towns would be stopped. Logging would be banned in the entire province.
He asked us to help in the greening of the brown mountains
And to help guard the forest.
We went home rejoicing and thanking God once again
for not abandoning us.
The Eucharist became a victory celebration.*

*Now the logging companies have disappeared from San Fernando
and from the neighboring mountains of Bukidnon.
The trees that we have planted are growing.
When our children grow up they will see green mountains
and they can swim and fish in the blue river without fear.
The heavy rains will not flood their farms
Nor the long hot summers parch the land.
They will remember us for what we did for them.
And they will remember the wonderful things God has done for us.*

Systematic Theological Section

The basic framework that was used for the environmental praxis of the BECs was theological-anthropological. The main text that was used in many of the bible-reflection sessions, education seminars and liturgies was the creation account in Genesis (1:1-26, 2:25). The main theme: human beings created in the image of God and therefore are stewards of God's creation and have the responsibility to care for the earth.² This was a good starting point. However, it is not adequate in fully explicating the environmental praxis of BECs. An ecclesiological framework is necessary.

2. We were indebted to the pioneering work of Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call for a New Theology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1986).

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The ecclesiological framework was not explicit or fully developed then. At that time we did not emphasize the connection between the environmental praxis and the nature and mission of the Church. From hindsight, reflecting on their praxis, the ecclesiological framework becomes apparent. Thus, in my doctoral dissertation, I linked the environmental praxis with the nature and mission of the Church and BECs as a kingly/servant community.³ Further reflection has led me to link the environmental praxis with the vision of a Renewed Church promoted by PCP II following Vatican II – particularly the Church as Communion and as People of God and as Church of the Poor.

In this paper, I would like to explicate the ecclesiological framework for environmental praxis. As far as I know this is a framework that has not been developed so far. It is my contention that the responsibility to defend the integrity of creation and to care for the earth is an integral part of the Church's nature and mission – hence, also of the BECs which are the church at the grassroots.

**Ecclesiological Perspective: Vatican II and PCP II
vision of a renewed Church**

The ecclesiology of Vatican II promoted the vision on the Church as Communion and People of God – a priestly, prophetic and kingly people. As a reception of Vatican II, PCP II promoted the vision of a renewed Church – a community of disciples, living in communion and participating in the mission of Christ as a priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and as Church of the Poor. This finds expression in the BECs (PCP II no. 137-139).⁴

In view of the ecological crisis, the Vatican II and PCP II vision of a renewed Church can provide an ecclesiological basis for the environmental praxis of the Church in general and the BECs in particular. There is therefore no need to come up with a new vision of the Church. What we have is sufficient. What is needed is to develop the full implication of the vision of a Renewed Church.

3. Amado Picardal, "Basic Ecclesial Communities: An Ecclesiological Perspective" (Rome: Dissertation submitted to the Pontifical Gregorian University, 1995).

4. Ibid. for a more detailed discussion of the vision of a renewed Church in Vatican II and PCP II.

What follows is an overview of this ecclesiological vision and its pastoral implication in relation to the environmental praxis.

There are three ecclesiological themes that serve as the framework for the environmental praxis of the BECs: a) ecclesial communion, b) the people of God participating in Christ's prophetic, priestly and kingly mission, c) the church of the poor.

Ecclesial Communion

The vision of the Church as *koinonia* emphasizes harmony, unity, partnership, friendship, sharing and participation among the members of the Church and with the Divine Trinity. This model of the church draws its inspiration from the first Christian community whose way of life is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47, 4:32-35). Vatican II and PCP II consider this as the model towards which the Church should strive to live.

There are various levels of ecclesial communion: local/intra-communitarian, inter-communitarian, universal. Communion is realized within families, between families within BECs, intra-parochial, diocesan/inter-parochial, regional, national, universal. The church is called to be a network of communions – a communion of communions. In ecumenical dialogue, the ultimate goal is full ecclesial communion. The universal Church can be seen as a communion of local churches with the Church of Rome and the pope as exercising the ministry of communion. The parish is envisioned as a network of BECs.

How does the ecclesiology of communion contribute to environmental praxis?

There is a need to expand the vision of communion. Communion should not just be understood from an *ad intra* view but also *ad extra*: we are called to be in communion with our fellow human beings, with creation/other creatures and ultimately with God. This was the vision of St. Francis of Assisi. Sean McDonagh refers to St. Francis' vision of communion which is found in his Canticle of the Creatures:

“For Francis, every creature in the world was a mirror of God's presence and, if approached correctly, a step leading one to God. What emerges here might be called a fellowship approach

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to creatures...An untamed environment untouched by human beings, whether it be the vast ocean, rainforest or a desert, points to the ultimate mystery at the heart of the world which continually calls us to deeper communion with the earth and with God.”⁵

McDonagh proposes the broadening of the understanding of communion:

“The Church is called to make Christ’s redeeming love present in the world. The early Church did this through ‘devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and prayers’ (Acts 2:42). This text still embodies the challenge which Christians face in the modern world. Any adequate understanding of the apostles’ teaching would include giving special attention to the theology of creation: the fellowship and sharing must now be expanded to cover the largest community which includes humanity and the totality of God’s creation.”⁶

The call to communion requires defending the integrity of creation, sharing the world’s resources with one another and with other creatures and with the future generations (communion of goods). We have to preserve the earth which is our home and of those who will come after us.

Communion is also the basis for the concerted action among BECs, parishes, dioceses, with other Christian denominations, religions, NGOs, POs, etc, to defend the integrity of creation. This was the case in San Fernando, Bukidnon and other areas in the Philippines.

People of God – A Prophetic, Priestly and Kingly People

According to Vatican II and PCP II, the Church is the spirit-filled community of the People of God that participates in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and kingly mission. While these categories seem to adopt a traditional stance, environmental praxis can recast and

5. Sean McDonagh, *Greening of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 173.

6. McDonagh, *Greening*, 201.

reconfigure these terms so that they will remain relevant in our context. The BEC, proposed by PCP II as the new Filipino way of being Church, is by its nature and mission prophetic, priestly and kingly/servant community. During the early 1970's, the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference used this framework for the BECs: "*Ang Gagmayng Kristobanong Katilingban - Katilingbang masaksibon, maampoon, maalagaron*" (Basic Christian Communities – Witnessing, Worshipping, Serving Communities).

How can this vision of the Church be a framework for environmental praxis?

Prophetic Community

The Church is a community that proclaims the Word of God – the Good News. It is an evangelized and evangelizing community. It is a witnessing community.

The Church is the community that announces the Gospel of life, of liberation, of justice and peace, and the integrity of creation. It is the community that denounces every manifestation of sin and evil in the world – the injustices, exploitation, violence, the culture of death, and the environmental destruction.

Sean McDonagh affirms the prophetic function of the Church vis-à-vis the ecological crisis:

"The Churches must take a prophetic stance for justice and integrity of God's creation. There are two complementary elements in the prophetic witness. The first is to criticize the present unjust economic, political and social system which impoverishes people and destroy the environment... The Church must try to empower people to formulate a new vision of a more equitable and sustainable world."⁷

This prophetic nature and mission of the Church and BECs was evident in the case of San Fernando. There was always the element of denunciation and annunciation during bible-reflection sessions in

7. Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth: The Christian Vocation to Promote Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1994), 114-115.

the homes and chapels, during the education/ conscientization seminars, and in the homilies during the Masses.

The denunciation must be supported by studies on the causes and effects of the ecological crisis (logging, mining, aerial spraying, global warming) that would debunk the pretense that environmental disasters are ‘acts of God’. A study of the recent Church documents on the environment and recent theological works about it is, likewise, necessary.

The Church as Kingly/Servant Community

According to Vatican II and PCP II, the Church is a Kingly People. The “kingly” office or “*munus regale*” is understood in terms of service, thus it is appropriate to refer to the Church as a servant community. Thus, this vision of the Church can be linked with the servant model of the Church which Avery Dulles wrote in his book “Models of the Church.”

Historically, the kingly office was narrowly associated with the governing function of the hierarchy. In Vatican II, this has been understood in a broader sense – not just the exercise of pastoral leadership in the spirit of service – but also to the mission of the entire Church (the hierarchy and the laity) in making the Kingdom of God a reality in the world, in serving Christ in others, in renewing the temporal order, and in the work for development, justice and peace.

In general, *munus regale* is linked with the social mission/apostolate of the Church. According to PCP II, a church that is renewed has to be involved in a “renewed social apostolate.” This means that the Church as community must be involved in addressing the concrete problems and concerns of humanity – poverty, war, environmental degradation, injustice, violation of human rights, etc. The kingly mission involves struggling against sin and evil in society as well as within each person. This kingly mission is understood in terms of service which is concretely expressed through various praxes aimed at social transformation such as: organizing socio-economic projects that respond to the needs of the poor and the needy; defending human rights; mobilizing for justice and liberation; working for peace; caring for the earth and protecting the environment. These activities

can be understood in terms of working for the kingdom of God – a kingdom of justice, and love.

There is no explicit link between *munus regale* and environmental praxis in the documents of Vatican II. However, Karol Wojtyla, in his book ‘Sources of Renewal’ explores the meaning of the kingly office, linking it with God’s command to humans to “subdue the earth”:

This aspect of participation in the *munus regale* of Christ is closely linked with God’s original command to man to “subdue the earth” (Gen. 1:28), a command and a destiny on which light is thrown by the revelation of Christ. Christians will measure up to that eternal plan only when they have come to understand “the inner nature ... of the whole creation”; and, as a result, are able to “bring created goods to perfection”; this is the task and purpose of human labor, which will then reflect the kingly mission of Christ. The whole work of transforming the world and bringing it to man’s level by means of science, technology and civilization - all this bears the imprint of man’s kingship and his sharing in the *munus regale* of Christ. Vatican II sees one aspect of the participation in the skill and activity of the laity “interiorly raised up by grace.” The activity resulting from “competence in secular disciplines” must not only express in works of technology and civilization but must also serve to strengthen justice, love and peace among men.⁸

In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II once again links the “munus regale” with the task of “subduing the earth” (Gen 1:28).⁹ In this encyclical, John Paul II refers to the environmental crisis that has ensued from the efforts to develop and exploit the earth’s resources:

By submitting man to tensions created by himself, dilapidating at an accelerated pace material and energy resources, and **compromising the geophysical environment**, these

8. Karol Wojtyla, *Sources of Renewal: Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* trans, P.S. Falla (London: Collins, 1980), 266.

9. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 16

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structures unceasingly make the areas of misery spread, accompanied by anguish, frustration and bitterness.¹⁰

The problem is that the command to “subdue the earth” has often been understood as the unbridled exploitation of the earth’s resources which has led to the environmental crisis. Thus, John Paul II clarifies what “kingship” and “subduing the earth” really mean:

The essential meaning of this “kingship” and “dominion” of man over the visible world, which the Creator himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.¹¹

Hans Kung also explains what “subdue the earth” means and links it with care for fellow humans and the environment:

“Subdue the earth” does not mean (as first became possible in modernity) “exploit the earth,” but “cultivate it and look after it.” “Rule over” the animals means taking responsibility for them as being in the image of God... The “fill the earth and subdue it” of creation story (Gen 1:28) cannot be understood as *carte blanche* for unscrupulous exploitation and destruction of nature and the environment ... Believing in the creator God allows me to take my responsibility for fellow human beings and the environment.¹²

PCP II sums up what the kingly mission implies:

But faith is exercised not only in explicitly religious acts. It must be exercised in service, to care for the needy and to care for our earth. In one’s neighbor faith recognizes not only a person made in the image and likeness of God, but a bearer of Christ himself, so that whatever is done to the least of his brethren is really done to Him. And faith likewise recognizes that the earth’s

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Hans Kung, *The Beginning of All Things* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 116, 125.

environment has to be nurtured and cared for. Its destruction not only spells the end of the support system of life but also betrays our stewardship of God's creation. Expressing our faith through deeds of justice and love is particularly urgent in the Philippines where the exercise of faith often seems to be restricted to the realm of religious activities and private morality.¹³

Thus, to be a servant community means: service, caring for needy, caring for the earth and doing deeds of justice and love. What is most significant here is the emphasis on the care for the earth: "the earth's environment has to be nurtured and cared for."

How to concretely fulfill this servant mission which includes preserving the integrity of creation will have to be worked out in each local context. Some BECs have been doing the following:

- Anti-logging campaign and participation in reforestation projects
- Campaign against mining projects, aerial spraying, coal-fired & nuclear power-plant projects
- Promoting sustainable agriculture, organic farming, enterprises & livelihood projects using green technology, etc.
- Adopting waste disposal systems
- Using alternative energy sources (solar power, bio-energy, etc)

The CBCP Pastoral Letter on the Ecology points to the various efforts that have been done and regards these as signs of hope and part of the mission to make the kingdom of God a reality on earth:

We are also encouraged by the growth in environmental awareness among many Filipinos. Small efforts which teach contour plowing, erosion control, organic farming and tree planting can blossom into a major movement of genuine care for our Earth. We are happy that there have been successes. Both Chico dam project was suspended and the Bataan nuclear plant mothballed after massive resistance. This year the people

13. PCP II, no. 79.

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of San Fernando, Bukidnon and Midsalip, Zamboanga del Sur defended what remains of their forest with their own bodies. At the Santa Cruz mission in South Cotabato serious efforts are underway to reforest bald hills and develop ecologically sound ways of farming. The diocese of Pagadian has chosen the Eucharist and ecology as its pastoral focus for this year. These are all signs for us that the Spirit of God, who breathed over the water, and originally brought life out of chaos is now prompting men and women both inside and outside the Church to dedicate their lives in enhancing and protecting the integrity of Creation. As people of the covenant we are called to protect endangered ecosystems, like our forests, mangroves, coral reefs and to establish just human communities in our land. More and more we must recognize that the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimension in our Christian vocation to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in our times.¹⁴

Peace Advocacy and Environmental Praxis

Peacemaking and caring for the earth are an integral part of the mission of the Church and BECs as servant community. John Paul II highlighted this in his 1990 World Day of Peace message “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation.”¹⁵ Benedict XVI echoes this theme twenty years later in his 2010 World Day of Peace message “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation.”¹⁶ He considers the destruction of the environment as a major threat to world peace and thus, working for peace requires defending the integrity of creation. He asserts that “the protection of the

14. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines “What’s Happening to Our Beautiful Land: A Pastoral Letter on the Ecology” <http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1980s/1988-ecology.html>.

15. John Paul II. “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation: A Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html

16. Benedict XVI, “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation: 2010 World Day of Peace Message”

environment and peacemaking are essentially linked.” Benedict XVI emphasizes the need for education for peace:

Education for peace must increasingly begin with far-reaching decisions on the part of individuals, families, communities and states. We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries.¹⁷

Indeed, the destruction of the environment does violence to the earth, to people and other creatures. It is often carried out and perpetuated with violence (e.g. destruction of plants and animals and various species, harassment and murder of environmental activists). It is part of the culture of death.

In the struggle to defend the integrity of creation the means used must be peaceful, non-violent and creative. Although there will be times when extra-legal means are employed, the principle of active non-violence must govern every praxis. This also means avoiding any alliance with groups who use violent means and discouraging them from doing so. In their struggle to defend the environment, the BECs must be prepared to follow the way of the cross – to avoid harming others and to be prepared to suffer and die. They must continually reach out to those who oppose them and reconcile with them.

Priestly Community

According to Vatican II and PCP II, the Church as people of God is a priestly people – a priestly community. The priesthood of the Church is interpreted in liturgical-sacramental terms as well as existentially. Thus, the Church is a worshipping community and a community that offers spiritual sacrifices. How can this be understood and lived in terms of environmental praxis?

In San Fernando, the liturgies celebrated in the parish church and the BECs became vehicles for conscientization regarding the environmental issue. There was always a call to action that flows

17. Ibid.

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from every liturgical celebration. The themes of the novenas for the fiesta of BECs focused on the environment.

During mobilizations, liturgies were celebrated in the picket-lines and barricades. Setbacks and victories were celebrated liturgically. It was while the Mass was celebrated at the barricade that the PC-INP riot squad came and dispersed the people violently. When the government declared a total log ban, the people celebrated with a Eucharist followed by fraternal agape.

The liturgy was linked with the struggle of the BECs. The readings, the signs and symbols highlighted the theme of the environment (the earth, water, seeds, plants, trees, etc.).

The symbols focused on God's creation, communion with creation, defending the integrity of creation. Karl Gaspar gives an account of a liturgy celebrated in San Fernando:

The Church was packed even before the Mass began. All the BCCs were represented; nearby BCCs sent big delegations. From the backdrop decoration, to the songs, to the symbols offered, one can easily grasp the theme of the liturgy ... The ecological issue registered prominently through the entire liturgy. The short play had a mother and child talking about the disappearing forest and the consequence on the lives of the people. The prayers asked for God's grace so that the people will continue the campaign for the end of the destructive logging. At the offertory procession ... another small group walked the aisle towards the altar carrying soil, water, branches of trees, forest products... A prayer was said when they were at the altar: *"Lord, here are the offerings we bring you from the things we find in our surrounding. These are the signs of your goodness and love for your children. But during these days, we are faced with big problems of equitable sharing of these gifts and of protecting them. Here is the soil which is the reason why we came to San Fernando, the promise we sought when we left our homes in the Visayas and other parts of Mindanao... Because of the forest destruction we see soil erosion all around us. The hills and the banks of the river have been affected: more and more top soil is swept down the river. The water that flows from the spring on the watershed is decreasing and the dry season has lengthened. We have responded to the ecological problem by staging the picket which ultimately resulted in the end of the logging operations. But we need to carry on. Help us to deepen our commitment"...*

The last small group approached the altar bringing with them fruits of the earth: rice, corn, fruits, vegetables and the like... A prayer was offered: “*Lord, receive our offerings which are the fruit of our labor – rice, corn, fruits and vegetables. All these came from our efforts to produce food for our families. With our deep appreciation for your gift to us, in our aspiration that we will never be wanting for these, we pray that there will always be food on our tables... Taking part in the priesthood of Christ, we offer these gifts to you, as we seek to be reconciled with you and our neighbor.*” ... There was delicious lunch served after the Mass, prepared by the people themselves.¹⁸

Sean McDonagh affirms the role of the liturgy in addressing the ecological crisis:

“The Church should recognize the transformative power that liturgy and worship have in addressing the ecological and justice crisis. Good ritual can help communities evolve a new mode of human interaction with other human beings and the natural world.”¹⁹

According to Northcott, as an expression of the Church’s priestly nature, the Eucharist celebrates the Church’s communion with creation and with the Creator:

In the messianic banquets of Christ described in the Gospels, in the meal traditions of the early Christians, and in much of the subsequent Eucharistic traditions in Christian history, the ritual meals involve acts of blessing and sharing. In this way the whole creation is drawn representatively into the atonement, reconciliation and divine-human fellowship which are the fruits of the work of Christ and which constitute the priestly calling of the people of God to continue Christ’s pioneering priestly work, in drawing the creation into praise of the Creator.²⁰

18. Gaspar, *A People’s Option*, 84-86.

19. McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, 147.

20. Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 2007), 261.

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McDonagh also affirms the role of the Eucharist in celebrating the communion between the Christian community and the Creator and with creation:

The Eucharist is also pregnant with all kinds of creative possibilities for deepening our awareness of the holy communion which unites God, human beings and all creation. In the Eucharist the elements of bread and wine, taken from the earth, are offered in the memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and thereby transformed into his body and blood. The experience of the Eucharist challenges Christians to work for a just society, where food is shared and everyone has enough. "It summons Christians to work for a sustainable society, where the bonds of interdependence are more clearly understood, experienced and protected... The Eucharist is the holy communion in which all the members give themselves to one another in order to promote abundant life for all. Those who celebrate the Eucharist animated by such vision is expected to relate in a much more sensitive way to other creatures and to the earth as a whole."²¹

The Eucharist celebrates Christ's sacrifice on the cross – his total self-giving of himself – his body and blood – for the salvation of humankind and creation:

In recalling God's graciousness in the context of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord, our gifts are transformed into his body and blood. Christians believe that as members of a community we share the gifts of Christ's body and blood. But this breaking of the bread and pouring out of the cup reminds us of Christ's sacrifice – that his life was poured out for others to bring salvation, wholeness and peace to humanity and earth.²²

This self-sacrifice is not just to be celebrated but also lived by Christians in their day to day lives in Christ's memory. The priesthood of the community is not only celebrated liturgically, it is also lived

21. McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, 150-151.

22. McDonagh, *Greening of the Church*, 142.

existentially. The highest expression of this priesthood is the self-giving and self-sacrifice of the members and leaders of the Christian community – martyrdom. The Eucharist that was celebrated in the barricade as the people were being dispersed violently highlighted this. The Eucharist celebrated for Fr. Satur Neri who was killed by illegal loggers also highlighted this supreme expression of his priesthood.

The Church of the Poor

The Church of the Poor is a central theme in FABC documents and in PCP II. Although not explicitly mentioned in Vatican II, the theme of Church of the Poor was discussed by John XXIII a month before the council and promoted by Cardinal Lercaro. There is a reference to the theme in LG 8. During the post-conciliar period the vision of the Church of the Poor developed in Latin America and Asia.

PCP II integrated it in the vision of a Renewed Church. It has three levels of meaning:

- Embracing evangelical poverty – rejection of the idolatry of wealth, dependence on God's providence, living a simple lifestyle and sharing of material resources
- Option for the poor
- The active participation of the poor members in the life and mission of the Church

How can the vision of the Church of the Poor be understood and lived in view of the ecological crisis?

To embrace evangelical poverty means in concrete rejecting greed, consumerism, luxurious and materialistic lifestyle that has contributed to the ecological crisis. It also means adopting a more simple and "greener" lifestyle.

A lifestyle centered on consumerism contributes to overproduction, dependence of fossil fuels, use of technology that destroys the environment. Nortcott shows the effect of consumerism on the environment:

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The last forty years of industrial consumerism has conferred on a minority of the world's people levels of luxury and surfeit... The consumer cornucopia of material goods is driven by advertising and fashion and by the entertainment industry and it has fostered a culture of superficial hedonism and waste. Citizens of the industrial empire increasingly regard it as their birthright that they should continually buy new clothes, own cars, enjoy foreign holidays and fill their lives with the latest electronic entertainment devices while living in superheated or cooled homes sparkling with every kind of lighting device. "The constant turnover of consumer objects, and the waste of the precious metals, minerals and fossil fuels used in their making, fosters growing instability in the ecosystems and now in the earth system. Industrial consumerism is a form of material culture which is entirely at odds with the regenerative and recycling patterns of natural systems. As the throw-away society mines precious metals and fossil fuels from beneath the earth's surface and later buries them in holes in the ground, or emits them to the atmosphere, it comes into conflict with the earth system and threatens its continuing vitality."²³

John Paul II warned against the damage caused by consumerism on the environment and the need to adopt a simpler lifestyle as one of the solutions to the ecological crisis:

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause... simplicity, moderation, and discipline, as well as the spirit of sacrifice, must become part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.²⁴

Benedict XVI also emphasizes the need for a simple lifestyle as a response to the ecological crisis:

23. Northcott, 33.

24. John Paul II, "Peace with the Creator, Peace with All Creation: 1990 World Day of Peace Message"

It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social, environmental and even economic point of view.²⁵

McDonagh reiterates the need to live a simpler lifestyle and in harmony with nature:

The Church's call today to live both simply and in harmony with nature arises from our understanding of the seriousness of the ecological crisis and our new sense of Christian responsibility towards all creation. This spirituality must promote a spirit of non-acquisitiveness, of sharing, and of harmonious relationships at the inter-human level and between humans and the rest of creation.²⁶

A simpler and “greener” lifestyle would require a reduction of “carbon footprints.”

It means less dependence on private transportation and oil which contributes to GHG. It means more walking, biking, and using public modes of transportation not dependent on fossil fuels, etc. It means avoiding wasteful consumption, waste-management, etc. It means developing a greener environment (cleaning-up, gardening, tree-planting, etc.). It means a more natural diet, less meat-consumption, etc. It also means constructing houses and building with natural ventilation, lighting and less dependent on electrical appliances.

Option for the Poor should lead to the awareness that a high standard of living is maintained at the expense of the poor, thus the need to scale down and simplify our lifestyle and share our resources with the poor.

Active participation of the poor is needed in the efforts to defend the integrity of creation – in the campaign against global warming, logging, mining, in reforestation, clean-up polluted areas, waste-

25. Benedict XVI “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation: 2010 World Day of Peace Message”

26. McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, 155.

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management, and other creative means to defend the integrity of creation.

Concluding Remarks

The Vatican II and PCP II vision of a renewed Church does provide an adequate ecclesiological framework for the environmental praxis of the Church in general and the BECs in particular. In this paper I have attempted to work out the full implication of this ecclesiological vision vis-à-vis the serious ecological crisis that humankind is facing. The task for the local Church, the BECs and pastoral workers is to own and understand fully this vision of a renewed Church and find concrete and creative ways to live it out at the grassroots level.

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