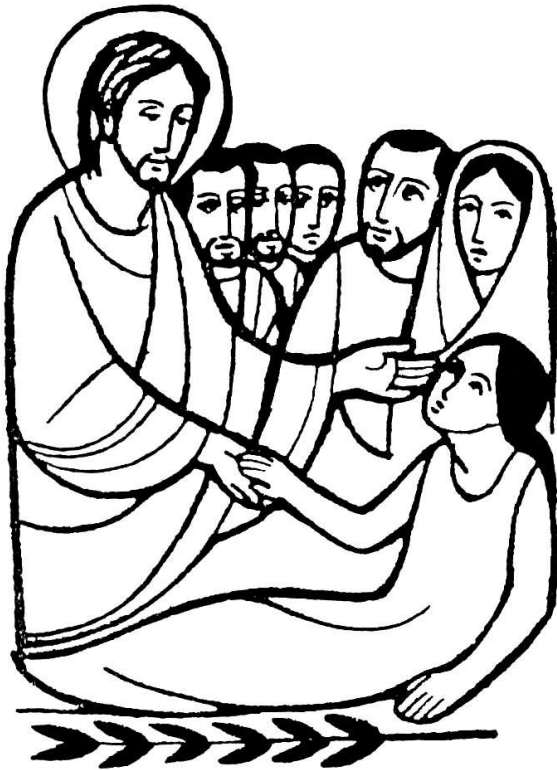


Towards A Servant Church:



Building up the Local Church

by Francisco F. Claver

INTRODUCTION

Economic and political questions are not ordinarily the main subjects of discussion when national conferences of bishops meet. But when such questions and the answers to them have to do with the well-being, not to say survival, of the very people the bishops call their "flock", they cannot, as pastors, close their eyes to them on the plea that politics and economics are outside their competence as churchmen.

In the Philippines today, the economic and political situation is very bad and the general population suffers horribly as a consequence. When the bishops of the country met for the first of two annual meetings in January of this year, one question among many that rose out of the national situation was posed in relation to the growing Communist

insurgency: "What do we do as Church in the event that the Communists succeed in their efforts to overturn the government and install themselves in power?"

It is not an old question. For years, there have been a number of priests and religious who have been sympathetic to the aims of the Communists' "struggle for liberation", even to the extent, in a few cases, of joining them in the hills. The one big difference is that now a Communist take-over is more of a possibility than it was a short two years ago.

The bishops answered their own question and the general tenor of their answers went thus:

Let us discuss Communism more with our people, catechize them, show them how evil and unacceptable Communism is, how incompatible with Christianity.

A minority—but a substantial minority—came up with a startlingly different answer:

We are not going to do anything different then from what we are doing now.

I would like to use differing responses of the Philippine bishops as a springboard from which to go into the subject of the development of a Servant Church, and indeed under the even narrower perspective of building up the Local Church. The two ideas, the Servant Church and the Local Church, may at first glance seem completely unrelated, but their close interlinking will, I hope, become clearer below.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The question the bishops posed to themselves is underpinned by two other related questions: What is the Church? What is its mission? And the differing answers given imply different conceptions of the Church, different definitions of its task in the world. The inescapable fact is that as one's theology of the Church is, so is his pastoral action. And just as inescapable is another fact, namely, that there

are variant theologies of the Church concretized in different emphases in pastoral work. Thus, if one's dominant conceptual model is the Institutional Church, he would most likely emphasize hierarchical roles, authority, law, order, perhaps verbal orthodoxy, etc. On the other hand, if he made much of the Church as Sacrament, he would conceivably put stress on the holiness of the Church, prayer and liturgy, the witness it must give of this holiness to the rest of the world, works and programs that will be for the greater sanctification of people.

The problem is not that there are variant theologies, variant models. The Church in its totality is a mystery which not one single model, not one theological school of thinking will be able to express or comprehend fully. The difficulty of expression and comprehension is further compounded by the admitted limitations of language—any language. What all this adds up to is that our human grasp of the mystery that is the Church will always be incomplete. And if this is so, there is always the danger that any one of the many differing theologies and models of the Church will, at one time or another in the Church's history, be made into an absolute. As a result, a partial understanding of the Church is then taken to be the only way of looking at the Church; the stress of a particular model, the insight of a particular ecclesiology, is made so dominant that all other stresses and insights are made light of or totally excluded. What results is a caricature of the Church—and a caricature in theological terms is a heresy!

The very same danger is present, of course, when we speak of the Church as a Servant Church, when we make its special emphasis our sole criterion for what constitutes the Church to the exclusion of all other just as valid (and just as necessary) criteria. Saying this does not mean, however, that we cannot, should not, make the kind of emphasis which is called for by the idea of the Servant Church and which we will now make in this article. And we do not make this emphasis arbitrarily, but out of necessity, for the very reason that an over-emphasis on other aspects of the Church has led to harmful imbalances. In the recent past and continuing up into the present, the institutional model of the Church has been the sole one and we see only too clearly the dangers of its dominance over other models.

If we must now put stress on the Church as Servant (and as noted above, also as Local) it is precisely to correct the imbalance. We trust the present preoccupation, then, with the Servant Church will not lead to another caricature of the Church but help rather towards a more holistic concept of it. (The striving for integral wholeness will be the only corrective against the triumphalism that often comes when one believes he has a corner on the truth and everybody else is wrong.)

THE SERVANT CHURCH

Thus, putting greater stress on the Church as Servant must be seen in view of correcting an imbalance, not of creating another—even if at first blush we seem to be doing just that. If, as the term implies, the serving aspect of the Church is to get greater emphasis now, it may be good to ask what reasons prompt such an emphasis, what developments in thinking, especially in pastoral work, lead to the choice of emphasis.

I am neither a Church historian nor a theologian, here I cannot claim expertise in their areas. But I think 15 years as a bishop in Bukidnon province, a deeply rural area of the Philippines, has provided us (the priests of Bukidnon and myself) with enough experience in communal discernment of our pastoral work. I would like to draw on that experience to reflect on what the Servant Church is, aware at the same time that ours is not the experience of every diocese in the Philippines nor in the rest of Asia for that matter. (Even if our experience is not an exact replication of conditions existing in other Churches, perhaps there may still be something of value in it that may be applicable to situations elsewhere.)

Malaybalay was set up as a Prelature Nullius in 1969. As early as 1970, the priests of the Prelature decided as a body to make social justice a priority of our work. In practice this meant supporting a farmers' movement for greater economic and political justice, and for the greater recognition of their rights and special problems by a government which, on balance, was more for the rich than for the poor. It was rough going from the very start, not the least of our problems being ourselves, our thinking, our theological

presuppositions. "Being on the side of the Poor" demanded great changes in the way we conceived the Church, defined its task, drew up pastoral programs, and financed its priorities. In going through discernment process, to make a long story short, we had to seriously face questions that had never occurred to us before in our ordinary pastoral work. Were we going into the work of justice mainly because we thought it was the best way of strengthening the existing institutional Church, of converting Catholics into better Christians or bringing non-Catholics into the Church? Or was it because we were aware our record as a Church in responding to social questions was not of the best, and by witnessing to justice we would thereby make it more credible as the preacher and custodian of Christ's Gospel? Or was our commitment to the task of working for justice (irregardless of its witness value, or its potential for convert-making) something we had to do, whether we liked it or not, purely and simply because it is mandated by Christ?

These were not idle, speculative questions. They reached, we realized early on, to the very heart of the Christianity we professed. And we saw clearly that, yes, we had to be concerned about conversion—Christ's Gospel is essentially a transformative message both for individuals and for whole communities, whole peoples. We saw, too, that we had to continually witness to this transforming message, work for the inculcation of the values of the Gospel in persons and societies. But we also saw that in the final analysis the gift of faith, to which conversion and witness lead, was something that depended primarily on the Lord's giving. We could only help dispose others to faith; we could not give it to them. And this disposing of others centered itself on our doing of the Gospel, on our service to others, on the charity we practiced ourselves as followers of Christ. The doing, the service, the charity—this depended very much on us; this was our part in the work of evangelization; this was what Christ mandated us to do.

Following this perspective, we came to realise something else: our witnessing to Gospel values, our capability to dispose others for conversion, depended to a large extent on the credibility of our acts as Church. The service of the Church—whether it be in the administration of the sacraments, education, health, works of charity, etc.—is the

fulfilling of the Word that must precede its preaching. "Fulfil and teach", not the other way around, is definitely Christ's way of acting (cf. Mt.5. 19). But how to bring the whole Church—not just its appointed leaders—to fulfil and teach the Gospel as a body, a community, to do so credibly and with power?

THE BCC AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

The only way of properly answering the above question is to pose it to the rank-and-file members of the Church and let them come up with an answer. "Let them." A simple enough idea, but put into effect and followed through in all its implications, it leads inevitably to the development of a more participatory Church, not only at the level of hierarchy and clergy but more importantly at the level of the laity. And a participatory Church at the grassroots is none other than the Basic Christian Community, the BCC.

In its barest essence the BCC is the Church that makes provision for its members to participate as fully as possible in its total life—in its thinking and reflecting as a community of faith, in its work of evangelization, in its action as a community in the wider society in which it is embedded, and in its organizing of itself to do all the above. It is only in a Church of this kind, participatory in every aspect of its life, that the communal preaching of the Gospel—the fulfilling and teaching of the Gospel by a whole Church community—can be effectively and forcefully done. And such a Church will necessarily have to be a Local Church.



It leads inevitably to the development of a more participatory Church.

The term Local Church means a Church that is not only in a place, located geographically within a given nation or people but more importantly of it, a part of the nation, sharing its language and culture, its life, its fears and problems, its hopes and dreams, its character as a distinct group of people. If the essence of the BCC type of Church is precisely its participative character, and if its members truly participate in its life—and life in both its ad intra and ad extra dimensions—they will do so as themselves. Which means, they will take part in the life of the Church as bearers of their particular culture; they will bring into it their cultural tradition, the way that tradition has shaped their mode of thinking and behaving, their language, their art, their special way of being human.

The end result will be a truly local Church. It will be a Church whose members are genuinely inserted into a given people, sharing a common history and a common way of life, yet one with the universal Church in their acceptance of the faith of the Gospel, attempting to live that same faith in the place of their insertion as citizens and as Christians.

IMPLICATIONS FOR A SERVANT CHURCH

However one defines a Servant Church in theological terms, from a pastoral point of view its main lineaments will have to be along the lines of service to people in their needs—suffering with them, bearing their burdens with them, accompanying them in their journey through life, and always in the spirit of Christ, the Suffering Servant.

Spelling out all the pastoral implications of such an understanding of a servant Church model is an exercise that, if we are to be true to the methodology of participation which we make much of here, has to be done in a participative way at all levels of the Church. Still, a few more or less obvious conclusions can be drawn that will be of help in our own considerations. I would like to summarize some of them here under the ideas of 1) people's needs, 2) the Church's involvement, 3) discernment, and 4) the perspective of faith.

1) People's Needs

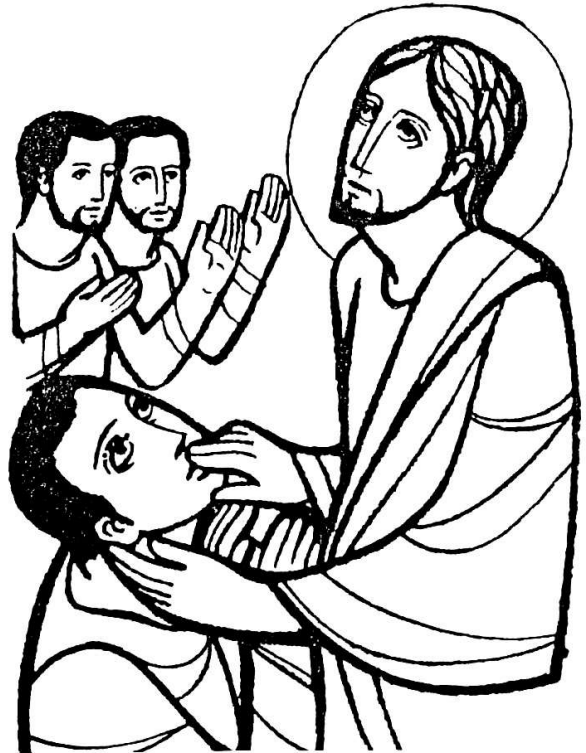
That the Church is to serve people in their needs is a definition of the Church's mission which is as old as Christianity itself. The traditional corporal and spiritual works of mercy are enshrined as practical injunctions springing from the heart of the Gospel. The Church has, wherever it is to be found, encouraged their practice without question, even institutionalizing them for greater effect. But if such service dates from its inception, the mode of its conduct and the focus of its exercise have changed somewhat over the years, especially in recent times. Today there is a wider acceptance of the social dimensions of the traditional works of mercy, a deeper awareness that action for charity has to be conjoined with action for justice, that not cultural values only but also social structures must come within the transforming purview of the Gospel. And this has expanded the areas in which the Church fulfils its service to people.

2) The Church's Involvement

Accepting what was referred to above as the "social dimensions" of the Church's works of mercy and their transforming character will mean going into areas of human life that we have long eschewed as not being the areas of the Church's direct competence in our preaching of the Gospel: the political and the economic. Developments in Church thinking on the social question do not allow for a cavalier opposition of the spiritual against all other aspects of life—an opposition implied in that eschewing. Neither do they affirm the easy entry of the Church (the Institution) into economics and politics, pure and simple. The least we can say, following the traditional understanding of roles in the Church, is that the areas of politics and economics are principally the concern of the laity. But the clergy must help, encourage, and support them to fulfil their roles properly in these areas of life, make provision in their preaching to form and educate the laity to fulfil their economic and political responsibilities in society. Such formation and education are within the competence of the clergy—or should be; these define for them what their involvement is in the economic and political fields.

3) Discernment

Given the kind of thinking expressed above, there is all the greater need for the development of the discerning-community type of Church. Such questions as role competence, its exercise by both clergy and laity, especially in the involvement of the Church in social questions, are best answered in churches in which discerning processes are built into the Church's organizational make-up, becoming the ordinary way of facing up to problems besetting the lives of Christians. The BCCs, where they are encouraged to grow as they should, will necessarily be discerning communities. The logic of a participatory church demands that each member take part in the faith-reflection of the community. And it is a faith-reflection that will not center on spiritual matters alone but on all life problems that have to do with the full living and practice of the faith of the community, and indeed explicitly as a community of faith.



The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are enshrined as practical injunctions springing from the heart of the Gospel.

4) The Faith Perspective

If the discerning process is not going to be merely a sociological "analysis of the situation" of the life of the Church within the broader society in which it finds itself, it has to be done consciously and explicitly—and always—from the perspective of faith and with a view to a response from faith. Hence, both perspective and response will have no other criteria for valuing and judging than those of faith. If they were not so, the discerning process would easily degenerate into a purely rational exercise, and ideological considerations would replace what are called

here the criteria of faith. Discernment in faith by a whole community cannot be done except in the context of prayer and of docility to the guiding inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The community's discernment begins with faith, ends in faith, is thoroughly ecclesial from beginning to end. (This fact cannot be too strongly emphasized for the benefit of those who fear the BCCs are nothing but the unsubtle attempts by the Church to "meddle in politics" with impunity.)

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

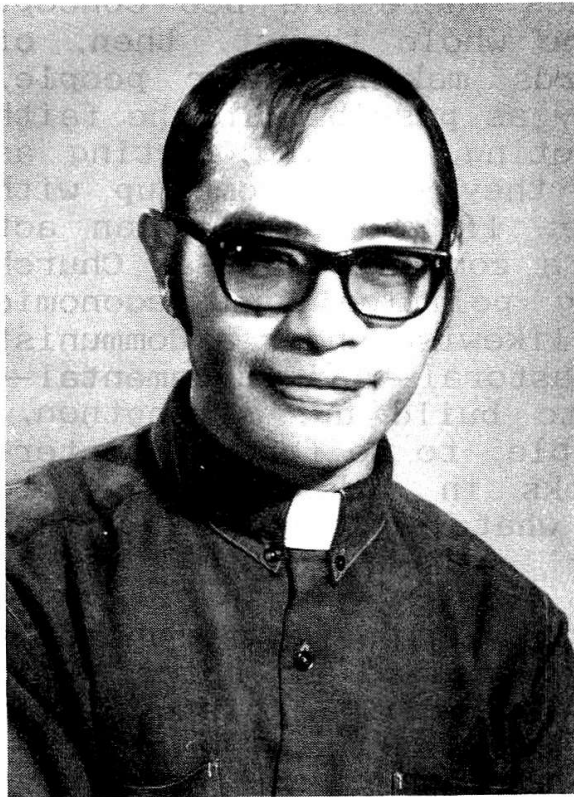
As noted above, the question the bishops of the Philippines posed to themselves about what the Church should do in the event of a Communist take-over of the country was in essence a question about the mission and the nature of the Church. Here I would like to focus attention on the response of those bishops who stated that, Communism or no Communism, they would approach the Church's evangelizing task in the same way.

There are many reasons why those particular bishops could say what they said. But the main one, to my mind, is that they are heads of dioceses where the BCC concept of Church is widely operative. The whole thrust, then, of their pastoral programs is towards making their people, at all levels, participate as fully as possible in the faith life of the Church, in its reflecting, praying, acting as a community of believers. Hence, they could come up with the confident statement they made: If the people can act now with faith, in faith, and in a communal way—as Church therefore—in regard to besetting political and economic problems, they will be able to do likewise under a Communist regime. To these bishops, their pastoral—and fundamental—task was crystal clear: it was to build up, strengthen, and confirm the faith of their people, to be forever fostering the faith-life of their flocks in order for them to be able to respond in faith to whatever happens to them as a people.

I am not too sure that the definition of the Church's pastoral task in the terms just expressed is specific to the Philippines alone because of its peculiar history. The definition, it seems to me springs from another definition—

the definition of the Church as Servant and indeed as participative, in the way we have spoken of service and participation above.

If in the Philippines we can speak of the possibility of a change in political and economic systems, the Church of Hong Kong, looking ahead to 1997, can speak of the inevitability of change. If I may venture an outsider's opinion, I will have to say that the old model of the Church as Institution, with its heavy reliance on hierarchical and clerical leadership, just will not do in the face of a future probability that the exercise of such leadership will not be as free as it is now, perhaps it may even be proscribed. (Unless, of course, it elects, in a strange twist of thinking vis-a-vis the Church's character as local, to become an appendage of the state.) Another thrust will have to develop within the next ten years—one that will put the responsibility of faith-action on the people at large and not just on the Church's leadership. It is in this light that the present conscious efforts to develop a Servant Church in Hong Kong—which I trust will also be fully participative and local—give much hope for the future of the Church there.



Francisco Claver

Born in January 1929

Joined the Jesuits in 1948

Ordained a priest in 1961

*Bishop of Malaybalay until
recently*

*Now Executive Secretary of SELA
(Socio-Economic Life of Asia,
A Jesuit-run organisation)*