

Co-Presentation Paper in Response to Prof. John Mansford Prior, SVD's Study "How Does the Catholic Church Deal with the New Religious Movements in a Constructive Way?"

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I am a parish priest in one of the large parishes in the Archdiocese of San Fernando (about 70 kms. North of Manila) where I am assigned as auxiliary bishop. The Holy Rosary Parish (HRP) is one of nine parishes in Angeles City (AC). HRP's territorial jurisdiction has about 60,000 residents; it covers just seven of the 33 villages of AC but is situated right in the center of the city. The whole of AC has a population of 326,336, about 90 percent of whom are Catholics. More than half of these have moved into the city from rural villages only in the last two decades after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991. I have no exact statistics but, as in the rest of the major cities in the Philippines (PH) where local migration has steadily increased, we too are aware that the rapid growth of evangelical Churches and Catholic Charismatic movements has indeed been truly phenomenal. I am inclined to agree with Prof. Prior in the case of my own parish that the success of the Pentecostal movements is partly attributable to the capacity of the said movements to respond to the spiritual and social needs of the urban migrants.

Our team of five priests at HRP celebrates six Masses every day and eleven Masses on Sundays. We get an average of at least 2,000 people per Sunday Mass, more or less a total of 22,000 Mass-goers every Sunday. It is hard to know exactly how many of the people who come to HRP for Mass every Sunday are really our "parishioners" (i.e., residing within the territorial jurisdiction of HRP as geographically defined). Even the lower middle-class Filipinos have become more mobile; they go to the parish Church where they feel spiritually nourished and where they feel a sense of community. I still have to find out what percentage of the 54,000 Catholic residents (85% of 60,000) in my parish really comes to Church regularly on Sundays. Even half of this population would already be difficult to fit into our already relatively huge parish Church. We're in the process of getting a more accurate profile of our Sunday congregations, but I wouldn't be surprised if only about 40-50% of them are actually my "parishioners", territorially speaking.

We have regular Catholics and members of traditional mandated organizations attending Sunday Masses in our parish, as well as those who come from parochial and trans-parochial charismatic movement (CMs), such as *El Shaddai*, Couples for Christ, Immaculate Heart, Spirit of Love, *Lingkod ng Panginoon*, and the Lifegiver community. The latter is the only parochial CM among them. We also have the BECs which are basically *lectio divina* cells grouped into clusters and chapters but functioning within the parish structure and initiated by the parish as an effort to reach the "unchurched Catholics". The FABC workshop paper by Antonio de los Reyes on BEC cited by Fr. Prior presents a comparison of CMs with BECs that sounds more like a caricature than reality. De los Reyes lays out a stereotypical description of the CMs as "confined to a spirituality of conversion, of holiness and fellowship, failing to galvanize its adherents into a force of advocacy and action against structures of sin." (Prior, p. 12) On the other hand, he idealizes the BECs as able to "integrate worship, catechesis and social action"

and “committed to the transformation of society and the liberation of people from oppressive structures.” It’s a good thing that Fr. Prior knows how to take the report with a grain of salt; he notes that, as a matter of fact, “many BECs remain as small neighborhood groups for pietistic bible sharing and administrative units for the larger parish.” (Prior, 12) Most of the BECs I know in the country are a product of the effort to reach Catholics at the fringes of urban and rural Chapel communities within parishes. Fr. Prior is right in saying that “BECs *per se* cannot be identified with social activism”; there is hardly any consistency or uniformity in the way they are evolving and, as far as I am concerned, they do not pose the same kind of challenge that CMs do to most dioceses in the country.

The CMs involved in my parish were actually the ones that called my attention to the fact that fundamentalist evangelicals (better known in the Philippines as “Born-again Christians”) had been aggressively penetrating universities and other school campuses and luring young people to their lively “youth gigs” and “bible encounters”. It was they who suggested to their fellow CMs to get their act together and respond to the needs of the youths in our parish community before we “lose” them to evangelicals. They even went out of their way to collaborate with their fellow transparochial CMs in order to come up with a parish-sponsored “Life in the Spirit Seminar” (LSS) for young people, in order to attract them to the parish instead of the evangelical fellowships.

When I sounded off to them the topic of this conference and the research findings about Pentecostalism, I was very much surprised by their reaction; they felt deeply offended about being lumped together with classic and neo-Pentecostals. In fact they resent very strongly the idea that “Charismatic Catholics and Protestants are closer to each other in terms of their religiosity than they are to their respective non-charismatic co-denominationalists.” (Gabriel, *Evangelicals...*, p. 6) They feel that such a judgment is unmerited and would only contribute to the further alienation of Charismatics from the Catholic Church. Many of them have indeed been treated with suspicion by many parish priests and doubted, as regards the “Catholicity” of their practices. On their own, most of the Charismatics that I know do in fact assert their Catholicity and care very much about “keeping the Catholic flock within the fold” and doing something proactive in order to protect regular Catholics from what they regard as predatory behavior on the part of evangelical movements that prey on Catholic disenchantment with the Church hierarchy.

My own CMs at HRP are mostly transparochial but actively serving the parish as lectors, altar servers, ushers, family & life advocates, catechists, Bible apostolate & social action workers, music ministry volunteers, etc., even while they maintain their loyalties to their respective charismatic communities. Of course they would tend to serve only in the parishes where they feel welcome. They do not have the iconoclastic tendencies of the evangelicals; they seek the Church’s sacraments, pray the rosary, venerate Mary and the saints like regular Catholics do, and defer to the ordained ministers of the Church even as they follow their own lay CM leaders and attend regular Bible study sessions and prayer meetings. (Of course they also continue to experience occasional conflicts and tensions with parish priests or diocesan bishops.) Surprisingly, the CMs which De los Reyes describes as unable to “come to grips with the imperative of channeling its formidable

power into the needs of the temporal world, towards the Gospel's call to transform the social order according to the plan of God," have shown more evidence to the contrary—at least in my parish (and in the rest of Pampanga, for that matter). Of late, the CMs active involvement in Pampanga in social action programs for the upliftment of the poor, in advocacies for environmental protection, for good governance and responsible citizenship, in collaboration with our Archdiocesan Council of the Laity has been noteworthy.

The most common issue of parish priests and diocesan bishops against CMs is their apparent lack of rootedness in and commitment to their home parishes. I am more and more convinced that this apparent behavior is actually no longer true only of CMs but also of non-CM Catholics in Filipino urban parishes like HRP. More and more, even regular lower middle-class Church-going Catholics are learning to behave in a “trans-parochial” way. This is reinforced by their mobility (both in the physical and the social sense) and evidenced by the impermanence of their commitment to their “home parishes”. It is to be taken as a matter of fact that their immediate sense of Church is with their own CMs, and only secondarily with the parishes in which they feel spiritually nourished. Parish priests have to work hard at keeping them in their fold because their competitors are not really the evangelicals but other parishes that show a little more dynamism and tend to be more welcoming and sensitive to their needs.