

BOOK REVIEW

**Antonio-del Castillo, Fides, and Raymund B. Habaradas. 2024. *Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: Histories and Stories of a Pilgrim Church***

Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines  
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This is the first locally published compendium of historical narratives of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) at a national scale and is a fruit of the 2021 Local History Writing Workshop for Lay Volunteers in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao to Prepare Diocesan Accounts for BECs. It is the outcome of several years of collaborative research undertaken by De La Salle University (DLSU) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Committee on Basic Ecclesial Communities, through the support of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the Lumina Foundation for Integral and Human Development. This landmark work compiles stories of the beginnings and ongoing journeys of 32 dioceses across the archipelago as told by local BEC leaders and representatives in English and different Philippine languages (Cebuano, Ilocano and Tagalog). It is significant not only as the first publication of its kind after 50 years of BEC existence in the Philippines, but also for engendering a culture of scholarship in this particular ecclesiology which is very much needed at present.

Aimed at “provid[ing] the communities with a better understanding of the unique experiences of BECs”, the book begins with an introductory chapter by Monsignor Manuel G. Gabriel, the Executive Secretary of the CBP Commission on Basic Ecclesial Communities. To set the tone of the entire book, he recognizes the local BEC leaders as “Storytellers” and points out how each narrative “unveils the message of the *Kerygma*”. He then proceeds to give an extensive history of BEC from the biblical period until the Fourth CBCP-BEC National Pastoral Assembly in 2019, the same year when five decades of BEC presence in the Philippines were celebrated. The subsections that follow highlight the challenges that BEC faced, a listing of the theological

reflections, write-ups, research, studies, and theological inputs by prominent clergy and lay scholars, and the four thrusts of the ecclesial communities toward the future.

Following the introduction is a summary at national level provided by Jonathan James O. Cañete. This section reiterates what Fr Amado Picardal identified as the origins of BEC, placing emphasis on how it started at the grassroots as a response to the call of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of the Church rather than developing from liberation theology itself. It also lays, as a foundation for the succeeding sections, the Seven Pillars of BEC Culture (Awareness as Renewed Christians, Communion or *Koinonia*, Word of God or *Kerygma* and Catechesis, Prayer and the Eucharist or *Leitourgia*, Social Action or *Diakonia*, Option for the Poor, and Participative Membership and Servant Leadership) as a guiding framework for assessing the implementation of these ecclesial communities. The section further introduces the regional summaries wherein readers will be able to grasp the identities of the BECs in the local language; *Munting Sambayanang Kristiyano* (MSK) for Luzon, *Gagma-yang Kristohanong Katilingban* (GKK) for Visayas, and *Kristohanong Kasilingan* (KRISKA) for Mindanao.

The book is then divided into three sections representing Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, the main island groups of the country which are loosely referred to as “regions”. Regional summaries serve as introductions for each of these sections. These were written by Jonathan James O. Cañete, Samantha Julia V. Ubiadas and Leonardo O. Quimson, Jr. There is more extensive coverage of the regional history not only of the BECs but also of the Catholic Church itself, followed by a summary of the narratives according to the seven pillars. Although the three regional summaries are similar, their conclusions were written differently.

The narratives, titled according to the name of the diocese, succeed the regional summaries. There are fourteen narratives from Luzon, ten from Visayas and eight from Mindanao. The presentation of each narrative varies from one diocese to another. Most begin with the history of the diocese and its geographic description, followed by a list (and/or sometimes a directory) of its vicariates and parishes. Several dioceses would further present the organizational structure of their BEC through a list of its ministries under the diocesan, parish and chapel community levels. This is usually followed by the enumeration of the religious formation, human formation, and socio-economic or social development activities which are implemented, with some narratives even reporting the rate of participation. Several dioceses also detailed their recruitment processes. Some narratives include a brief background of pertinent social issues or historical events such as martial law, which had a major impact on the BECs. One narrative includes frequency tables of survey data, while

another describes its system for recognizing outstanding BECs, parishes, chapels and clusters. Many of the dioceses dedicate a section of their narrative to the issues and challenges that they encountered or continue to face as well as the responses, solutions and interventions they implemented in the past or plan to undertake in the future. While only a few narratives include a concluding section, these also vary in content. Some present a synthesis of their narrative while others share their realizations and future directions, not only of the BEC but also of the diocese itself. One diocese ended with a list of its parishes, detailing its year of establishment, titular and feast day. Considering all these, each narrative is therefore a witnessing of the continuous renewal of the Church at the grassroots.

Although not meant as a reference text, the book substantially presents the concept of BEC from a historical point of view while providing numerous examples of how it is today. The strength of the book lies in the culturally rich storytelling of the BEC founders and local organizers. The diverse narratives offer a glimpse into the landscapes in which the ecclesial communities sprang to life and provide the readers with firsthand accounts of how the lay communities, with the guidance and support of the local clergy, responded to the calls and subsequent challenges of the Church, highlighting the interplay between tradition and innovation, and flavoured by each diocese's ecclesial and political culture. To a certain extent, there are also some challenges with regard to not having a uniform approach in storytelling. A number of narratives, for example, are written in Philippine languages that may not be comprehensible to some readers, especially when translations are not provided. Furthermore, the lack of a basic content outline across the narratives makes it difficult to compare information depending on one's need. Considering that the local BECs trace their beginnings in Mindanao, it would be good to have more narratives from this region to provide more historical and sociocultural depth.

As a Lasallian educator myself, I believe in the intrinsic value of community as a privileged space to encounter God in and through others. BECs are described as “primary classrooms” where children learn socialization, emotional regulation and other necessary life skills. Hence, these ecclesial communities provide a natural context for children to learn these essential human skills in preparation for participation in school and their other relevant environments. BECs, are able to gather not only individuals but also families, which is a strength of Philippine dioceses that must be continued, nurtured and supported. Furthermore, BECs are regarded as “homes of synodality” because these promote the participation of the people through dialogue and collaboration. Synodality basically entails the People of God gathering and journeying together. This also applies to how religious education is carried out in classrooms. If a class is reimagined as an ecclesial community, then religious education

becomes more than just a subject; it is now a gathering in the name of God and an opportunity to build Church.

The existence and continuous propagation of BECs in the country is an embodiment of the flourishing collective faith of Filipinos. This book, which is a testimony to the vitality of BECs in the past 50 years, is a very timely resource that recognizes and immortalizes these stories of beginnings, struggles, successes and visions. As a religious educator, I highly recommend this book to teachers, catechists, clergy and religious women and men, and the lay faithful in the local church communities; it is an indispensable reference for BEC, helping us to learn from the past, be grounded in the present and plan for the future of this “new way of being Church”.

### **About the Reviewer**

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