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CULTURE AS ENABLER FOR SDGs: Learning from Jesus of Nazareth's Vision/Mission

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Abstract: The UN document, *Transforming Our World,* affirms the enabling role of culture in its goal of transforming the world. While the UN assumes the necessity to interface with traditions, it does not take the time to articulate culture's ambivalence. This article insists that proponents of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) should be mindful of culture's enabling and disabling tendencies. It thus maintains that every action plan for the SDG will profit from the tradition-transforming ways of Jesus of Nazareth i) who challenged many religio-cultural traditions of his time; ii) who espoused a ministry of empowerment of the poor; iii) who was portrayed by the evangelists as the real bringer of Good News and *shalom* against the claim of the global powers. This paper further discusses Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God as the guide of today's Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC), the spearhead of a religious culture that enables the poor in their pursuit of prosperity and fulfilment. The discussion on the BEC serves to focus on the implications of Jesus' vision/ mission for sustainable prosperity and fulfilment of peoples as targets of the SDGs. Thus, this article may also be considered to articulate the need for another SDG target: the transformation of cultures.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Prosperity, Kingdom of God, *Shalom*, Solidarity, Basic Ecclesial Communities, Hegemony.

1. Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly's *Transforming our World* (TW) document has established the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) meant "to transform our world for the better by 2030." These

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SDGs are oriented towards "areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet" (TW Preamble), also known as the five SDG Pillars: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. To guide the stakeholders' projects, TW has provided various indicators against which the efforts to achieve the target-goals are to be measured. Based on TW's formulation, it is evident that the 17 SDGs are universal, indivisible, and intertwined[1]—that every target is essential for all, and each goal can only be achieved in relation to other targets. For example, success in the sharing and distributing essential resources involves capacity building and top-to-bottom behaviour modifications that also implicate institutional revamps. In a sense, goals are not just considered ends but also as 'drivers' or 'channels.'

Despite the emphasis on the economic, technological, and legal approaches to sustainable development and social transformation, it has to be emphasized that people also act based on the cues of cultural traditions. This means that any action plan about transformative SDGs must also consider the transformative role of morals, religious beliefs, rituals, popular organizations, and shared community practices. These 'non-material' resources are assumed as streams that could provide powerful 'undercurrents' (or web of meanings or pools of wisdom) to various social activities and pursuits associated with 'sustainable development.' Such streams are the taken-for-granted elements of the life-world,[2] also forming as a backdrop to the front-stage public that has become the dominant arena of every theory and practice of progress and development.

TW is not silent on the necessity to interface with traditions because it regards culture as an enabler for the SDGs. It states: "We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development (#36)." But being concerned mainly with a top-down delivery of resources shows less

[1]It states that: "The interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized" (#2).

[2]Lifeworld is "'the world of lived experience,' which is made up of the life experiences of other people and how they impact upon us as individuals … it consists of physical and social objects which are experienced by us as already existing and already organized" (Best 117).

attention to the further enrichment of non-material cultural resources as one of the goals of its action plans. Moreover, its understanding of sustainable development is also more focused on the economic, social, and natural-ecological dimensions. In that sense, its regard for culture as functional indicates less attention to cultural transformation as another important goal. But if cultures are to be regarded as enablers of sustainable development, these must indeed be transformative—not weak, not unethical, and not tools co-opted by groups or for class interests that transmit self-serving beliefs, rituals, and setups.

While SDGs assume the necessity to interlock with the life-world sources like cultural traditions and other communitarian standards of behaviour, it does not take time to articulate the ambivalence of culture—that fact of the presence of both life-giving and death-dealing elements or mechanisms in cultures. Indeed, SDGs should draw out principles from traditional sources of knowledge and community-based wisdom. But when SDGs cross the boundaries of a tradition, proponents must possess a more critically-informed knowledge about what they want to employ from the people's cultural habits and wisdom about their development. The task to evaluate the merits and demerits of a tradition cannot be done by a general council. Individuals are needed to leave the slippery ice of the UN halls to walk on the rough ground where every culture's lights and shadows may be closely observed. The TW asks everyone to get back to the rough ground when it states:

> We reiterate that each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development and that the role of national policies and development strategies cannot be overemphasized. We will respect each country's policy space and leadership to implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development, while remaining consistent with relevant international rules and commitments. (TW #63)

Nevertheless, the critical eye to identify the dross in culture does not generally come from top-level executives and organizers. Prophets and caring-saints are needed for such a very difficult and, most of the time, life-threatening task (Sparks 20-22; Brueggemann 39ff).

This article aims to show how some targets of the SDGs, precisely prosperity and fulfilment of lives, maybe realized through the enabling people-promoting traditions, specifically ethical-religious traditions that are faithful to the spirit of their founders and prophets.

One of the religious figures who walked on the ground populated by those who suffered from poverty in all its forms and dimensions is Jesus of Nazareth.

Various beliefs, rituals, and organizations have developed, particularly around Jesus of Nazareth's vision of the Kingdom of God. Three major developments in Christian theology and pastoral practice are the interpretations about God's reign or presence: 1) as an interior life, 2) as an after-life reality (Nolan 58ff), and 3) as worldly prosperity being the palpable sign of the presence of God. Beliefs and practices have been built around these interpretations resulting in the inappropriate understanding of the message of Jesus and (and more crucial) in making Christianity too introspective, pietistic, and apolitical on the one hand or health/wealth/prosperity oriented on the other hand.[3] As a result, teachings about the ethical dimension of faith became overly concerned with either a self-purification process that promotes a self-absorbed preoccupation with dependence and docility in order to obtain one's passport for eternal life or excessively worried about physical and financial victories—all of such tendencies are not enablers for the SDGs. Such introspective, pietistic, apolitical, and materialistic tendencies very often fail to grasp the fact that various non-gospel cultural accretions are already entangled with the Gospel message—like the building of hegemonic empires or the trumpeting of the white man's burden and male dominance or the unrelenting exploitation of nature; all of such would hinder genuine prosperity or flourishing lives of "People who are vulnerable [and] must be empowered" (#23).

Therefore, the proponents for the SDGs must be mindful of culture and religious tradition as both enabler and disabler. In other words, action plans for the SDGs may profit not from the disabling 'cultural accretions' but from the life-giving ways of Jesus—when he pursued his vision of the Kingdom of God through his ministry to the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized. His vision (the Good News) may be

[3] "The Prosperity Gospel is the doctrine that God wants people to be prosperous, especially financially. Adherents to the prosperity Gospel believe that wealth is a sign of God's blessing and is compensation for prayer and for giving beyond the minimum tithe to one's church, televangelists, or other religious causes" (Koch 1).

more encompassing, but we can focus on its implications for the issues of prosperity and fulfilment of peoples as SDG targets.[4]

2. Jesus of Nazareth—Minister to the Poor

Jesus of Nazareth wrestled with the pre-established mindset / ways of the religious elders and local rulers of his time—the Pharisees and the Sadducees, including the Priests and Lawyers Scribes, Rabbis, and the aristocracy or nobility.[5] It was the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were portrayed by the Gospel writers as the primary obstacle to the vision and mission of Jesus. This is mainly attributed to their roles as religious and moral leaders / teachers whose patterns of thought and action (enshrined in the obligatory ritual practices) negatively affected the lives of those at the margins of society and culture. The poor are at the fringes of society and effectively deprived of participation and integration in social and religious affairs. In other words, the religious culture of the elders distorted or disabled the primordial message of divine mercy and care. Through his ministry, Jesus wanted to correct this by presenting the caring God-Father to all, especially the poor. This concern to uplift the social conditions for the poor is consistently echoed in TW: "As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind… And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first." (#4) Moreover, it lays down the following guiding principle for its follow-up and review of the implementation of the Agenda: "They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind." (#74, e)

[4]TW has this about Prosperity: "We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature." (2)

[5]The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes were the three religious movements that represented the various approaches in the practice of the Jewish religion in the time of Jesus of Nazareth. The Essenes' views attracted the ritual purists of Judaism but none is mentioned in the New Testament much less to have encountered Jesus himself. The Zealots, though attracted some of the disciples of Jesus, were not portrayed to be Jesus' 'enemies' but rather treated as an issue subject to resolution through a contrary approach (cf. the 'sword scenario' with Peter [John 18:10-11]).

When Jesus of Nazareth went around preaching and healing, he was often seen or associated with the poor; he was there in solidarity with them as he dined with outcasts and forgave their sins. He brought prosperity to the poor, that is, by making them 'feel well' (*prosperus* in Latin) again. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12; Luke 5:20-22) would proclaim his version of happiness that may constitute a social condition for fulness, prosperity, and wellness for people (Pertiné, 82ff). This condition for prosperity and fulfilment is also a space for solidarity and mutual care—concretizing the presence of the divine. From the narrative of 'feeding of the multitude' (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17), one can also gather the enabling conditions of solidarity and mutual care when fish and bread were shared, and people ate and collected the leftovers in baskets.

Jesus made people experience, through his ministry, the fulness of *shalom*, a Hebrew word that means peace, harmony, wholeness, fulfilment, prosperity, welfare, and serenity—signs of God's reign. He said: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). This 'Peace,' *shalom*, is not just a simple experience of tranquillity but an experience of something palpable: healing, forgiving, and breaking bread as a community as felt expressions of compassion and care.[6]

He did go about 'doing the Father's will' not just by pointing at sinful acts but also by criticizing the "bigger constraints, larger threats, surrounding behaviour, the more serious moral problem confronting the Jewish society of his time: the distortion of religion by socio-cultural standards (wealth, honour, distinction, exclusive solidarity, power; cf. Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5]) and by the leaders who reduced worship into cultic rituals and legalities (see Matthew 6 and 23; Mark 7; Luke 10: 30ff. and 11: 37ff.). Such a myopic understanding and practice of culture and religion by those leaders have caused greater suffering to the already poor and needy" (Dagmang 375-76). Jesus identified this problem, and he was on the ground, walking with

[6]Wolterstorff claims that "shalom goes beyond justice. Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature… Shalom at its highest is enjoyment in one's relationships" (109–110).

> …the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable (those who weep), sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, demoniacs (those possessed by unclean spirits), the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, all who labor and are overburdened, the rabble who know nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last and the babes or the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Nolan, 27).

It was to the poor in-the-flesh that Jesus proclaimed his message as condensed in the counter-cultural image of the Kingdom of God and his ministerial acts of preaching, teaching, healing, table-fellowship, and forgiving of sins. The Kingdom of God, thus, became the core of his vision that energized his ministry to the Poor. Jesus was the embodiment of the vision of the Kingdom of God—he himself was the Good News made flesh. What constituted these portrayals of Jesus is no longer very clear to us since we no longer share the world of the Empire-builders of antiquity. A look into that world, through the eyes of the evangelists, may aid us to understand better the vision that made Jesus' mission pro-people and empowering as it also carried a message against disabling traditions and an anti-Empire message.

The anti-hegemonic tone of Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God was so clear and audible for his time. I will expand the implications of this anti-imperial quality of the vision of the Good News of the Kingdom of God and present how, through the Basic Ecclesial Communities, Jesus' pro-people mission becomes alive and relevant. This way, Jesus' message may be disentangled from the regressive elements that choke today's practices of the Christian faith and be considered as agreeable to TW's goal of social transformation.

3. The Gospel Portrayals of Jesus: A Broad Anti-Empire Narrative

During the time of Jesus, Palestine was again forced to submit to another expansive imperialist rule, after those of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Macedonian powers. This time Rome came with its Emperor, proclaimed as the King and the Lord of all peoples. He was publicized as the bearer of blessings, the dispenser of goods, especially of peace and order. He was the good message even as people were forced to pay tribute and display homage to him. His autocratic rule was a visible mode of military or coercive management of places and peoples. One could also consider this as the period's approach to global development under the imperial powers.

Euangelion (good news, gospel) is a concept initially attached to the Lords/Emperors who were bringers of 'imperial blessings' and were considered as the Good News themselves (Stanton 24). St Paul and the Evangelists used this term to apply to Jesus as the real Lord and the true Good News—a message that already bears the radical anti-empire jab. In other words, the 'good news' of the Emperors was 'bad news' with their unethical approaches to treating people.

Into this context, the words of the Gospel of Mark are striking: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1 ESV). In contrast to the Roman Caesar, Jesus is heralded as the king who brings shalom and ends war by conquering people's allegiance. In an imperial world where

> there was already a divine Savior and Lord who had brought 'peace and salvation' to humankind and was worshipped with feasts and hymns by those who 'had faith' in him. Paul and other apostles were regularly arrested by Roman officials and kept them in jail, on the grounds that 'They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus'" (Acts 17:7) (Horsley 12).

Thus it is clear that any suggestion that Paul has announced a 'gospel' in Thessalonica must be taken seriously as an anti-imperial proclamation: "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess. 1:9b-10).

There is a clear imperial context in some passages where Paul exhorts people to turn to God. Thus, in Paul's time, people who converted to Christianity cannot but associate the Prince of Peace title of Jesus with the prior claim of the Roman Emperor. For them, the message that Jesus himself brought and carried out through exorcism, healing, feeding, and preaching was the real Good News – without the enforced imperial tributes that supported more expansions and violent incursions into other conquered territories, places, and cultures. What Jesus brought was the genuine Good News that carried the promise of prosperity and fulfilment for persons and communities.

Empire building with its promises of Good News was a culture of conquerors, an exercise of power at the center's service—thus, not enabling for the people at the periphery. This was a pattern embodied and produced by the Assyrian, Babylonian, Macedonian, and Roman

conquerors (not to mention the other European Empires during the colonization period). Such imitation-patterns still make Empires and Imperialists of today, which undoubtedly also promise their versions of progress and prosperity.

4. From Augustus to *Capitalismus*

Augustus had control of the Empire, eliminating every resistance through outright annihilation or pacification tactics by intimidation and fear, including death by crucifixion. This kind of domination was also crystallized in the way the Empire was ruled and ordered in the various local social structures of imperial colonies. Hegemonic control from Rome was felt, understood, and translated on the level of subordinated or pacified values, the conception of life, and the social conscience pervading the few but the dominant population (Brent 17ff, 310ff). All of these would bring about aggregate effects on the ways of life of the common people—and these are felt by many as adverse consequences despite the Empire's promises of good news. This Roman form of imperialism transformed into economic imperialism—one that mercantilism thought as necessary for the distribution of goods and as sources of raw materials and slaves who would work on plantations and serve as servants in colonial homes. Colonized peoples may have felt its oppressive character, but economic imperialism was justified by the colonizers as an ethical duty, with emphasis on "the doctrine of universal ownership; … the right to develop world resources, the right to exploit weaker races, and the right to civilize backward peoples" (Akizewe 306). It was only towards the decolonization years that imperial brands of good news were strongly labelled as violation of human rights and infringement of peoples' freedom—and it was towards the modern capitalist era that the ethical implications of imperialism and colonization were voiced out and heard all over the world. Many of the decolonization processes involved bloody revolutions.

Later approaches to decolonization were already loaded with theories or reflections, including ethical ones (Revie 95) that encompassed both the non-violent and violent approaches to national liberations. Ethical principles have justified these movements of liberation that made Pope Paul VI speak, on behalf of the Catholic Church, about revolutionary uprisings:

> Everyone knows, however, that revolutionary uprisings—*except where there is manifest, longstanding tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country*—engender new injustices, introduce new inequities and bring new disasters. (*Populorum Progressio* #31; italics supplied).

Paul VI insisted that colonialism should "give way to friendly relationships of true solidarity that are based on juridical and political equality" (#52). He even asked the rich nations to set aside a common fund to relieve their impoverished former colonies (#52). He had set the meaning of progress and prosperity for people to be under the principle of the common good. Clearly, the economic and social responsibility for the poor should also be embraced as an expression of one's religion. This is to make right the wrong beliefs and practices that have also pervaded the culture of the colonies:

> "He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?" Everyone knows that the Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: "You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich." These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional. (#23)

In other words, under capitalism, solidarity and care for the weak (as well as mutual care) are still the conditions for bringing about *shalom*.

The colonial economic imperialism that formed into a capitalist world-system, with its globalized economy, also rests on the principles of division of labour, democracy, autonomy, rights, and free choice as well as on the body of legal principles (Habermas 332ff). These hang together as cultural elements but are also ambivalent. In a setup controlled by the strong and victors, such principles may be enabling but not quite empowering for the many disadvantaged people (like the less educated, unemployed, and indigenous peoples). That is why the Catholic Social Teachings have consistently emphasized the principles of common good, the practices of cooperation, and the orientation towards compassion and care, all highlighting the need for humanizing broad social bonds.

Since capitalism is the system that resulted from the consistent practices of special persons who capitalize on their private property for some self-interested gain (Dagmang 77), it has become the capitalists' colossal profit-making apparatus that further brought about negative impingements on the principles of solidarity and care. In various fields—factories, financing firms, service units, malls, agri-business farms, and e-commerce sites—market-driven activities reproduced the system that enlists and consequently transforms people and, eventually, their life-world. These are new environments and pathways for the development of values and standards of behaviour that are congenial to the maintenance of the system. Many of such values are learned, shared, handed down to the next generations, and considered obligatory by their gatekeepers. What people eventually imbibe are both the good aspects that profit-taking brings and the negative consequences that such practice would bring about.

Economic as well as cultural gains (the Western type) have turned persons into liberal-autonomous individuals. These have become the same gains that would commodify people and eventually send persons in modern setups towards greater isolation or privatization—too unwilling and unable to return to traditional solidarities. Despite the growth of new religious movements, religion has also become privatized. Finding oneself as an autonomous subject in secularized liberal-capitalist contexts does not necessarily translate into gaining an ability to pursue broader social bonds (Dagmang 125). The erosion of the extended family arrangements and traditional sexual intimacies result into the breakdown of solidarities that previously grounded the more socially sensitive personalities. That is why TW insists on the "enabling environment … essential for sustainable development" and does not reproduce the evils of unbridled profit-making" (#4).

Vulnerability to risks involved in competitive and money-driven lifestyles also spells, for many, "harder struggles to work for wages and greater determination to face up to the harshness of urbanized, liberal-capitalist dominated, mode of life. But when life seems to be reduced to a uni-dimensional pursuit of resources for survival, an individual's capacity for enriching emotional connections will inevitably suffer" (Dagmang 125-26; see also Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* #29-30). If the road taken is profit-seeking or self-interested struggle for wealth, even somebody's pursuit of distinction, honour, and prestige will endure the loss of resources necessary for more open

and intimate communication with loved ones; loss of opportunities to express oneself through work, and; loss of venues and relations for more gratifying social integration. In such a scenario, everyone suffers—not only the poor.

We thus should begin to live in a climate maintained no longer by people who work and out-compete one another in offering the most enticing products and services packaged as good news. Human beings should no longer be exploited in any kind of setup. We will not survive if money is the name of the game. Living in solidarity with and caring for one another will bring about a more socially-oriented form of shared prosperity and fulfilment.

Nevertheless, in this capitalist climate, promises of never-ending progress and prosperity pervade. This idea of prosperity would even hold its sway on the religious behaviour of many Christian believers. It has become known as the Prosperity Gospel, which makes the following its foundational belief: "I came so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). This version of good news is a distortion of Jesus' counter-cultural posture that gives attention to the humanization and development of peoples dominated or marginalized by hegemonic processes. Nevertheless, the profit-seeking mechanisms of today's capitalism are something that the prosperity Gospel adherents will exploit and maintain even as these bring about numerous unintended adverse effects on the poor and the planet (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*).

Jesus of Nazareth is no longer with us, physically. His liberating ways and caring deeds, however, have also been learned, shared, and handed down. His spirit is the one goading and inspiring people to denounce oppression and affirm solidarity with and empowerment of the Poor. The various hegemonic approaches to power, wealth, health, and victories by Empires and distorted forms of religion and culture will be questioned, especially by communities imbued with the ethics of care, which now form part of what is considered as the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) movement. The BECs are today's witnesses to the transforming presence of Jesus' spirit. From the bosom of such communities, a religious culture that is more caring and ethically enabling for the poor will spring forth and materialize. It is hoped that the BECs will form as a bridge between the SDGs and Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God.

5. The Church of the Poor and the Basic Ecclesial Communities

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) describes the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as small communities of Christians, characterized as a domestic Church emerging from the grassroots, united with their pastors but ministered by lay leaders regularly. They gather around the Word of God and celebrate liturgical life. They consciously integrate faith and daily life guided by regular catechesis and are concerned with sharing material and spiritual goods. They have a strong sense of belongingness and responsibility for one another and act towards justice (*Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* 35-52, 86-118). This is a far cry from the too-pietistic and other-worldly faith expressions or the prosperity Gospel (Medina and Cornelio 74-78) that also characterize the Christian religion in many parts of the Philippines or Latin America where BECs are flourishing. In the future, churches may be more driven and guided by PCP II's vision:

> Our vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and as a Church of the Poor – a Church that is renewed – is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement. This is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities (PCP II 137).

The development of the BECs followed the journeys of various global and local gatherings that wanted to introduce reforms in Christianity. After the Second Vatican Council, Latin America's Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) did its own version of *aggiornamento* or updating. CELAM's Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) documents) responded to the Latin American Continent's context of conflict, oppression, and poverty. On such issues, CELAM documents proved to be more progressive (or aggressive) than Vatican II even if they have been inspired by the Vatican II documents, especially by *Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes*, and *Ad Gentes*. It is no secret that the CELAM documents further inspired other regional churches to produce their own versions of Vatican II. This was the time when the Latin American liberation theology's influence had already spread across continents. Yet that time, the Church of the Poor theme is no longer new in the Asian region. The document issued by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in 1970 already called for the Church to be a Church of the Poor and has been consistent in working towards this vision (in its

triple points of evangelization of cultures, religions, and the poor). In the Philippines, the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference spearheaded the thrust towards the building of progressive churches whose rallying cry was "preferential option for the poor." It was in Mindanao where the first BECs were organized by foreign missionaries.

Imbued with the poor's culture, the Basic Ecclesial Communities would also embody Jesus's compassion and devotion to the care for the poor and the environment—cultural patterns that embody *shalom*. This can be considered as an enabling culture not only for the BECs but also for the SDGs.

In the BECs, Christians realize that caring for the poor may have to mean primarily as caring with and through the poor themselves. The charity *for* the poor or option *for* the poor that emphasizes the poor's identity as *receivers* is not consistent with the meaning of BEC. The hegemonic stance of Empire builders that perpetuates dependence is resisted by BECs promoting the poor's space for empowerment, inclusion, and flourishing. Being the Church of the Poor, the BECs provide the transforming space for the poor whose culture, habits, and strivings may dovetail with or anticipate the vision of the Kingdom of God—congenial with UN's SDGs.

UN's document *Transforming our World* presents various goals that may be adopted by Christians and integrated into the BEC programs. In a sense, the SDGs carry with them the message of universal peace, prosperity, and fulfilment, which also embraces the care of the planet—a vision that is already integrated into the faith-based pursuit of *shalom.* The BEC, being the cradle of Jesus's message of *shalom/* Kingdom of God*,* would also embody the SDGs. A difference between the SDGs and BEC vision is that the former does not carry the narratives of Jesus and the ecclesial communities of Paul. The SDGs are basically global directives for non-religious groups or organizations; while the vision of the Kingdom of God inspires faith-based communities like the local BEC setups. In a sense, BECs are already organized at the community level for the concrete tasks and experiences of *shalom/*Kingdom of God*,* while the SDGs have task forces and organizations that are not necessarily community-based.

The concept of 'Basic Ecclesial Community' refers to community, *ecclesia*, and the base—pointing to the substantive meaning of BEC. C*ommunity* emphasizes BECs not only as mandated organizations or associations that habitually transmit pietism but as communities

whose members live in close spatial, and social, proximity to each other and who regularly interact with each other as consociates (Holden 190). *Ecclesia*[7] is crucially important; for it fosters local assembly, popular social gathering, internal growth, and its link to the institutional church. BECs are a community by virtue of having the nature of communion and participation. They desire to improve interpersonal relationships within the community and encourage participation, especially in decision-making amongst the laity—not totally dependent on the clergy. What makes the nature of the Church' ecclesial' are things they hold in common—it includes the sharing of the faith and community (Sullivan 55). A *basic* community refers to a social base—a small number of people enough to know and relate well with one another. BECs are at the *base* in which most members are at the grassroots who are open to the divine in receiving the basic necessities of life and in maximizing their potentials. *Basic* has affinity with the expression 'grassroot community,' one that recognizes people at the base of society (poor), and empowered at the base of the Church (laity). With the supposition that BECs are mainly formed from the laity coming from the grassroots and supported by the institutional Church, empowerment[8] of the poor becomes an essential dimension of ecclesial-community building.

BECs become a place for the faithful especially those who are economically deprived to fulfil their vocation, be assisted in their austere living conditions, and nourish their visions for the future. We do not discount the fact that the poor have something to share in the community and are not just simply recipients of the aid of the Church. According to Oscar Romero,

> The world of the poor teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts

[7]In Greek antiquity, *ekklesia* is the assembly of leaders / elders who took charge of the administration of their city-states. In the Bible, *ekklesia* refers to the assembly of believers or the Christian church.

[8]"The term 'empowerment' was popularized in the mid-1970s, primarily through the publication of *Black Empowerment* by Barbara Solomon in 1976, and it is typically taken to mean a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, political or economic power so that individuals, groups and communities can take action to improve their life situations" (Norwood Evans, 141).

> from governments or from the church, but when they themselves are the masters of, and protagonists in, their own struggle and liberation, thereby unmasking the root of false paternalism, including ecclesiastical paternalism (Romero 184).

Consciousness-raising and capacity building are also necessary elements of empowerment (Norwood Evans, 143-145). It is not merely a form of adaptation to the environment but rather an increase of the capacity of individuals and the communities to "ameliorate social problems" (Gutiérrez 149-53).

The involvement of the poor must be multi-dimensional, which covers faith witnessing and performance in specific ministries. In this manner, the poor and marginalized are given opportunities to "fight poverty and oppose the unfair conditions of the present" (Paul VI #76) which do not only benefit them but also the non-poor. There will be no empowerment if the poor are not given a chance for greater participation. Empowerment must be pursued so that all members are able to participate in the life of the whole community—a moral commitment to prioritize their needs in a transformed world that reflects TW's vision of prosperity and fulfilment.

It is in and through the BECs that the Church becomes a Church of the Poor or the historical embodiment of a culture that is enabling for the poor and aligned with the vision of the Kingdom of God. The BEC as a basic-assembly/unit of the local church would not only be a living community serving the poor but most especially a community formed mainly because of the presence and participation of the poor. Enactments fostering BECs produce empowering spaces that bring the poor together as shapers of alternative worlds. The transforming religion of Jesus of Nazareth is certainly an enabler for the SDGs.

6. Conclusion

We expect good news from authorities by their goal-pursuing governance that produce benefits like peace and prosperity, clean environment, quality for education, work, and health. When these are met, authorities become the bringer of peace and good news. The present-day producers of goods and services are also exerting effort to bring commercial goods and services, good news to those who have the resources. The poor themselves feel some forms of exclusion by the mere fact that they do not have the means required by commerce; the moneyed's good news may turn out to be bad news for the poor.

Nevertheless, those who are treated as consumers and beneficiaries of false 'good news' by Empires are populating the Basic Ecclesial Communities where they are enabled or empowered by Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God. It is in the movement of the BECs that Jesus's vision will find its home assembly. It is through the BECs that the SDGs may also find a transforming home. Conversely, the following text from TW may also be BECs declaration:

> We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind (TW preamble).

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