

# **BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY AND ECONOMICS OF COMPASSION**

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## **Abstract**

There is an increasing number of governments, institutions, and civil societies (NGOs) that have been advocating economic systems, structures, or dynamics that would promote the good of the human person. People have started to realize that doing economics is not always within the realm of rationalized calculations but must look after the human person. This paper attempts to contribute to this agenda by employing an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and economics; drawing a moral-cultural framework towards a compassion-based economics. Together with the positive traits of today's economic alternatives and the salient features of Jesus' praxis of compassion, this paper would offer fourteen (14) criteria as basis for what could be the most feasible base/locus for an economics of compassion. Eventually, what has been considered as the suitable base/locus is the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs); hence, a BEC-based Economics of Compassion or BEC-EC.

**Keywords:** economic alternative, compassionate economics, BEC, praxis, human economy

## **1. Introduction**

Against the background of the menacing tendencies of the capitalist market towards human reification and commodification, people now have started to look for alternative economic systems and frameworks to do business and trade without compromising inherent dignity and worth of the human person. Theorizations proffered by renowned economic anthropologists and sociologists like Karl Polanyi (1944), Marcel Mauss (1967), Bronislaw Malinowski (1932), and Mark Granovetter (1985) have explored that human persons can determine and decide on certain economic exchanges and activities that are not entirely based on strict rationalized calculation but in terms of non-market valuations like kinship,

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friendship, community values, etc. Even the Church through her Catholic Social Teachings (CST) has not been silent on her promotion of the human person, dignity and worth over and above the market situation. Ever since Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* of 1891, the century-long endeavour still resounds in the many interpretations and schools that have espoused the Pontiffs' call towards a person-oriented market economics.

It is within this call towards a human economy this paper intends to contribute. While most of the proposals for and implementation of economic alternatives have been situated in secular (non-ecclesial) contexts, including even the Christian-based Focolare movement's "Economy of Communion," this paper argues for a suitability and feasibility of an ecclesial (human and communal) base that can support and sustain an economic moral-cultural framework based on Jesus' praxis of compassion, hence, a compassion-based economics. Defined and characterized along the spirit (meaning) of Jesus' compassionate behaviour as articulated in biblical narratives, this paper looks for a base that can authentically, at least potentially, embody the actuations and implications of Jesus' compassion. This search for a suitable base would end with an identification of the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) that, while more popularly identified with liturgical celebrations and other pastoral-religious activities, is herewith proposed as potentially (both structurally and teleologically) appropriate to be the base or locus for an Economics of Compassion (EC).

To justify this proposal, the paper looks into exegetical nuances of compassion as lived out by Jesus and makes use of such a paradigm to understand and discern the merits and qualities of BEC as the genuine locus for what is eventually proposed – a BEC-based Economics of Compassion or BEC-EC. This proposal would be a significant contribution for what has been an uptrend in today's studies on economics – the rise of the so-called "non-standard economic alternatives."

## **2. Research Questions**

The paper seeks to address the following queries:

1) How feasible is it to embed a biblical paradigm of compassion specifically drawn from Jesus' praxis of compassion into an economic dynamic/structure?

2) If a compassion-based economics is to be developed, shall it assume a more resolute stance as to replace the conventional economic

system (mainstream economics) or a less critical approach as a mere alternative among many?

3) What form and structure must it take in terms of human participation, size, coverage and affiliation among others?

### **3. The Emergence of Non-Standard Economic Alternatives**

Even the extreme proponents of free market capitalism nowadays accept that there are basic human needs that the market is not able to satisfy. Over time, the rejection of extreme free-enterprise/collectivist forms result to what today is referred to as “mixed” economies where private ownerships co-exist with the collective forms and the market lives side by side with non-market variants and mechanisms. A certain merger between capitalism and socialism is taking place and it differs from country to country. Some of the common traits of these non-standard alternatives include the following: preference to being small in size and scale (localized), outsourced from the ground and oriented towards it (decentralized), grounded on human interactions and associations, value-based ethics, non-profit motivation, and sustainable (ecological) development (moderation, preservation, and gradualism).

A rough survey of existing forms of the so-called mixed economies reveals strong collective character and ground-based human organization. These forms also boast inclination towards sustainable development and ecological conservation. On top of that, a significant feature is the emphasis on other-oriented human values of cooperation, generosity, solidarity, and compassion among others; as well as its preference for a small-size human organization knotted by common interest, familial connections, or geographical proximity (neighbourhood). For Ethan Miller, such alternatives have offered promise to the perils brought by the dominant economy.

Instead of enforcing a culture of cutthroat competition, they [alternatives] build cultures and communities of cooperation. Rather than isolating us from one another, they foster relationships of mutual support and solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at this developing trend towards decentralization, one cannot ignore the immense influence of E. F. Shumacher’s *Small is Beautiful*,

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<sup>1</sup>Ethan Miller, “Solidarity Economy: Key Concepts and Issues” in *Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and Planet*, ed. Emily Kawano, Tom Masterson, and Jonathan Teller-Ellsberg, Amherst, MA: Center for Popular Economics, 2010.

which was written as a challenge to “gigantism” of neoclassical economics.<sup>2</sup> For several decades, mass production offered more cheap goods than ever before; the mass media and mass culture opened up new opportunities to a wider audience. Shumacher believed that such scale led to a dehumanization of people and economic systems that ordered their lives. In his book, he criticized how modern organizations stripped the satisfaction out of work, making the worker reduced to a mere cog in a huge machine. Craftsmanship was no longer important, nor was the quality of human relationship. The economic system was making decisions based on profitability rather than human need. What Schumacher wanted was a people-centred economics because that would, in his view, enable environmental and human sustainability. The current forms taken by economic alternatives re-echo the bold ideas embraced by Shumacher in his Buddhist economics model. The crisis of 2008 and the growing unpopularity of neoliberal ideas spurn recent tides towards ‘humanizing’ the economic market system. This new terrain for thinking about the economy is a reaction to the many years of rational but impersonal calculations of economists. This new trend works under the name “human economy,” reminding everyone that economy is made and remade by people in their everyday lives.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 below shows a rough list of non-capitalist enterprises as practiced in various countries. One would notice the Venezuelan variant that while a socialist nation, the government has infused its state-aided communal banks with capitalistic component of profit through investment. The initiative for mixing does not only come from ‘capitalist’ countries but from socialist ones as well. It has appeared that extreme forms (highly communistic vs. highly capitalistic) are problematic and that a more appropriate course of action now is the hybrid road. These initiatives are widespread and worldwide. Even the highly capitalist USA bears local and from-below economic approaches that involve non-monetary exchanges like time and community service. The US initiative further implies that economic alternatives are as popular to wealthy countries as to the impoverished ones. Regardless of any specific political ideology or orientation a country or group may embrace, the concept does not seem to arise from a single political tradition or body of ideas.

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<sup>2</sup>See E. F. Shumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973, 56-66.

<sup>3</sup>See Keith Hart et al, ed., “Building the Human Economy Together” in *The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide*, UK: Polity Press, 2010.

**Table 1. Non-Standard Economic Alternatives**

Forms	Characteristics	Example	Location	Description
Solidarity Economy	local-based and grassroots	revolving loan funds	Mali, Africa	Interest-free funds from monthly contribution of community members are given in lump sum to one member each month
	non-profit orientation	“time bank”	Pasadena Maryland U.S.A.	People offer services (hours) they can provide in exchange for the services (in hours) they need
	human network and associations	‘communal bank’	Venezuela	Funded by government, ‘people's banks’ provide communities the ability to finance social projects, invest, and help out those in trouble
	cooperation-based	cooperatives	widespread	Sectoral representation with various kinds and forms (consumer, credit, producers, services)
Gift Economy	collective allocation based on need and abundance	‘dama’	Mali, West Africa	A gift-giving system practiced among women's social network ; just as you care for others, someone else will provide for you
	oriented to relationship			
Sharing Economy	creating a culture of giving from profits gained by member companies and corporations	Focolare Movement’s Economy of Communion (EoC)	Began in Brazil and has spread worldwide	The profits are divided into thirds; 1. workers’ development and improvement, 2. to develop and extend new businesses to provide new job opportunities, and 3. as gift to projects at home and abroad for people in real basic need.

Though emerging global preference to economic alternatives seem to know no boundaries, whether these alternatives are created to challenge the mainstream is still vague and inconclusive. For now, it seems that its popularity rests in giving people an option, a choice, an alternative. Still a work in progress, a perfect ideology is not what this new movement seeks. The spirit of building, strengthening and connecting initiatives based upon cooperation and solidarity still bear potential for possibilities that work for total human development.

### 3. Jesus' Praxis of Compassion

Biblical compassion (Gk. *splanchnizomai*) is one of the most powerful thematic frames that have characterized the praxis of Jesus especially in his response to the suffering victims of society and the oppressive socio-political/socio-economic system of the first century Palestine.<sup>4</sup> The popular English synonyms for compassion as “mercy” and “pity” fail to capture the depth of what has been originally used by the Gospel writers to refer to Jesus’ *splanchnizomai*. With no English word to exactly translate and capture the meaning of the original Greek word, *splanchnizomai* is more appropriately described as a bodily action/reaction that is provoked externally as it is caused by affliction, suffering and downcast state of the other. From mere physiological operation, compassion transforms emotions and feelings as reaction to the suffering of the other. It (compassion) leads Jesus to a commitment of action “to liberate people from every form of suffering and anguish – present and future.”<sup>5</sup>

Handicapped by space constraint and technical limitations, this paper would not intend to present a detailed exegetical hermeneutic of Jesus’ praxis of compassion but would simply enumerate the salient features with corresponding explicitations and behavioural actuations. For this, one shall refer to Table 2 below. In summary, the following are the salient features that can be drawn from Jesus’ praxis of compassion as exegetically interpreted in Gospel and Pauline narratives: option for the poor, capacity for institutional challenge, *kenotic* ethic, personalist/intersubjective/communal orientation, fiducial component, liberational/soteriological direction, Kingdom-based character, and eschatological dimension.

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<sup>4</sup>Marcus Borg, “Jesus and Politics in Contemporary Scholarship,” *HTS Theological Studies* 51, 4 (1995), 962-995.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008, 36.

**Table 2. Jesus’ Praxis of Compassion in Gospel and Pauline Writings**

Salient Features	How does Jesus do it?	How does Paul rearticulate it?	Implications to Market Politic
Option for the poor	Jesus identifies himself with the poor and outcast in friendship and solidarity.	Paul’s life is marked by choices for and with the margins: first, to be a Christian, second, to fight for the Gentiles	Identification with the margins, empathy and sympathy to suffering ones
Capacity for institutional challenge	Jesus challenges the oppressive structures for the cause of the poor through radical changes in state and religious systems.	Paul’s reassuring theology of authenticity as counter thesis to alienating tendencies of Sin	Critical stance, social activism, active involvement
Kenotic ethic	Jesus offers his own life as a ransom ‘for many’ so that others may live.	Authentic human life is essentially rooted in Jesus and is directed to reach out to empower	Selflessness, sacrifices, altruism, other-orientedness, generosity
Personalist/ intersubjective/ communal orientation	While there is option for the poor, Jesus invites all to friendship and community on the basis of humanity and personhood.	Paul’s theology of “Body of Christ” captures interdependence of the Christians, a demand that each one has to belong to one another	Friendship, community-building, social equality, person-orientedness, humane conditions
Fiducial component	Jesus trusts in the power of God, the capacity of the victims to liberate themselves	Faith is essential component of his compassion praxis	Faith, optimism, religiosity, spirituality
Liberational/ soteriological direction	Jesus empowers the people of Israel to a change	Coexistence among members of the Body as the way	Empowerment, enabling structures and

	of heart or <i>metanoia</i> as initial step towards political liberation.	toward authenticity; an antithesis to inauthenticity rooted in individualism	systems, capacity enrichment
Kingdom-based character	Jesus exhorts the people of Israel to share in the ideals of the Kingdom on the basis of social conversion.	While Jesus' kingdom refers to a particular situation, Paul uses it in universal sense.	Material detachment, service-orientedness, bottom-up approach, decentralization
Eschatological dimension	While he believes in the catastrophic fate of Israel from the Romans, Jesus keeps the hope alive to overcome destruction through Kingdom discourse.	Paul's universalist approach to the Parousia reveals a tension between something already accomplished and something yet to happen (already-not yet)	Hopefulness, enthusiasm, optimism

The table above illustrates the paradigmatic capacity of Jesus' praxis of compassion in terms of its (re)appropriate-ability to any situation/context across time, history, and even genre. Paul was able to understand his current predicament from the perspective of Jesus' compassion, although with completely different audience, situation, and needs. Extracted from Jesus' praxis are elements of action that can potentially emphasize the kind of practical mediation that can be sought as response to the new and challenging situation of current times.

#### **4. Properties of the Suitable Base**

The stress of the argument is not to downplay or ignore the positive and constructive traits of these 'secular' economic alternatives inasmuch as they are not fully reflective of the theological criteria of compassionate praxis. While it is inadequate to situate the proposed compassion-based economics on the criteria set by economic alternatives alone, it is equally deemed insufficient to solely consider the criteria on the basis of Jesus' compassion praxis. It is because the situation or context by which Jesus



manifested his compassionate gestures and acts were not inherently economic by nature and design, although a significant part of his entire Kingdom message included the liberation of the socio-economic poor. The praxis of Jesus’ compassion is deemed to be more socio-cultural than strictly economic. On the other hand, the featured traits of current economic alternatives, while secular in context, reveal positive aspects that may not be inherently obvious from how Jesus lived compassion. There needs, therefore, an integration of both the traits from Jesus’ praxis of compassion and secular economic alternatives. Ultimately, this paper shall propose to promote a base that can, to a certain degree, reflect the theologically-articulated compassion praxis in an economic setting; one that is unique from the non-standard alternatives in terms of its theological bearing and at the same time similar to them in some (secular) ways.

From the foregoing, the desired base that can appropriate the criteria of Jesus’ compassion praxis as well as structurally embody the aspects common to non-standard economic alternatives shall (approximately) possess certain traits and characteristics (see Table 3). The search for a suitable base includes the empirically-evident traits of the non-standard ones in order to highlight the socio-cultural properties of a proposed compassion-based economics model inasmuch as animate its social artefact (structure) with an inspiration from Jesus’ praxis of compassion that forms the moral cultural properties of the proposal, acting as more or less the core that holds the dynamics of behaviour and intention of such.

This paper acknowledges the significance of having these two properties to serve as criteria for the search of the suitable base. The integration or relationship of the two properties (socio-cultural and moral-cultural) that would determine the structural image of the desired base is not of causation but correlation. This explains why many if not all the so-called economic alternatives do not necessarily include the criteria provided by the framework of Jesus’ praxis of compassion inasmuch as the latter does not always presuppose the former in order to operate. This paper argues that in order to fully realize a suitable base that can appropriately operate the dynamics of a compassion-based economics, the two properties must occur together but not necessarily one causing the other or vice versa. In short, the two would complement each other.

**Table 3. Required Properties for the Suitable Base**

Socio(-civic) cultural properties (non-standard economic alternatives)	(Theologico-)moral cultural properties (Jesus' praxis of compassion)
Small in size and scale (localized) From and to the ground (decentralized) Human interaction and association Value-based ethics Non-profit motivation Sustainable, ecological, development	Option for poor Capacity for institutional challenge Kenothic ethic Personalist/intersubjective/communal orientation Fiducial component Liberation/soteriological direction Kingdom-based character Eschatological dimension

### 5. The Criterion of Suitability

There is a need to qualify the search for a “suitable” base insofar as whether the base should *already* possess the said criteria (actuality) in practice and operation or at least its *readiness/preparedness* in terms of the tendencies and conditions that are natural to its being and activity (potentiality). This paper is inclined to understand the “suitability” criterion as defined by the latter – where the base is found to possess conditions that can potentially be responsive and reflective of the desired characteristics towards compassion-based economics. While the current survey of economic alternatives (see Table 1) may have *implicit* expressions of *some* of the moral-cultural properties (compassion praxis), e.g. the solidarity economies, gift economies, cooperatives, etc. inasmuch as some that claimed its origin from religious or spirituality-based movements may have embraced *some* of the socio-cultural properties, e.g. Focolare’s Economy of Communion (EoC), still wanting is a base that can genuinely, even potentially, respond to the dual criteria of both the social and moral cultural properties in full integration.

### 6. In Search of the Base: The Vision of the ‘Church of the Poor’

Basing the search from the criteria, one would obviously notice that a suitable base must bear a theological, at least religious, undertone inasmuch as the whole social and moral criteria are indicative of not only a strong secular base but also its rootedness to Jesus (*Christogenesis*) and Church (*ecclesiogenesis*). In other words, the search is limited within and among ecclesiological praxes in terms of what ecclesial human base enjoys

or embodies a cultural cosmology that can best represent the liberational spirit of the formulated criteria. But before one attempts to search out for this base, given the multiple ecclesial cultural expressions, it is important to be guided by the vision of the so-called “Church of the Poor.” This particular vision serves as a heuristic device, a light, for the search for the suitable base, not only because this vision characterizes the wholeness of Jesus’ praxis of compassion as well as the principal thrust that moves many of today’s economic alternatives, but also due to the urgency by which this vision is presently reflected upon in recent days. In the days following his election, Pope Francis is believed to have presented his vision for the Church when during his monologue to the press people, he said, “... Oh, how I wish for a Church that is poor and for the poor.”<sup>6</sup>

Historically, the phrase was first used by Pope John XXIII in his inaugural address to the Second Vatican Council in 1962. “Later in 1970, during the Asian Bishops Conference in Manila, the phrase was picked up and in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines of 1991 (PCP II), it became the core message.”<sup>7</sup> Theologically, the phrase “Church of the Poor” is not any concept that the Church adopted and implemented; it is borne out of the contemplation on the very mission of Jesus himself. For Jon Sobrino, the fact that the church in Pentecost arises *after* the resurrection of Jesus speaks of the conformity of the church to the risen Christ including a concrete life of solidarity with the poor.<sup>8</sup> The theological core by which this vision stands is its “option for the poor,” inasmuch as Jesus’ praxis of compassion includes this important feature as well (see Table 3). The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, in its conciliar exhortations, has placed the vision of the Church of the Poor as central to the mission that the Philippine Church must carry out. In detail, PCP II explains its interpretation on the meaning and traits of what a Church of the Poor is (PCP II par. 125-132):

a) A Church that embraces and practices the evangelical spirit of poverty.

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<sup>6</sup>Pope Francis uttered this as he was narrating his reason for the choice of papal name after St. Francis of Assisi, a man of poverty, a man of peace, a man who loves and safeguards Creation. Laura Smith-Spark and Hada Messia, “Pope Francis Explains Name, Calls for Church ‘for the Poor,’” <<http://www.edition.cnn.com>> (21 March 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Bishop Julio Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute and Claretian Publications, 1995, 2.

<sup>8</sup>Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew O’Connell, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985, 89.

- b) It is one whose members and leaders have special love for the poor.
- c) It is where the poor are not discriminated against because of their poverty.
- d) It is one that will be in solidarity with the poor.
- e) It means that the Church will not only evangelize the poor but that the poor in the Church will themselves become evangelizers.

With the vision clearly juxtaposed, what is next is the identification of the suitable base not only in terms of the set criteria but also by the guiding spirit of the vision of Church of the Poor, not however viewed as two criteriological categories but simply one of the same spirit and sense.

### **7. BEC as the Suitable Base for a Compassion-Based Economics**

Neither a bold assumption nor an abstract utopia, this is a mere recognition of what the “Basic Ecclesial Communities” (BEC) has done thus far and what it can still contribute given its inaugural thrust as a (marginalized) localized communal base of people working together towards “total human development.” There is an air of reservation; however, with the way BEC is unable to fully realize its avowed mission and objectives particularly in the current thought and practice in the Philippine dioceses and parishes. While everyone knows that BEC had its origins in Latin America,<sup>9</sup> the Philippine BEC ‘brand’ was inspired by this Latin American phenomenon through the efforts of the Maryknoll Missionaries working in what is now the Diocese of Tagum and Mati. From thereon, it spread to the rest of the country with BECs developing their own identities.<sup>10</sup>

To argue for BEC as the suitable base is to affirm BEC as the base that does not only embody the predetermined criteria but also as the concrete human communal base that translates into praxis (ideally speaking) the vision of the Church of the Poor. The BEC phenomenon in the Philippines may be construed, historically, as a response to Filipino awareness of an oppressive regime and the emancipative clamour from some groups (leftists, social democrats, church groups, labour groups,

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<sup>9</sup>Julio De Sta. Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979 and Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

<sup>10</sup>Francisco Claver, “BEC in the Church in the Philippines,” *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Standard of Third-World Bishops*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1983; Warren Kinne, *The Splintered Staff: Structural Deadlock in the Mindanao Church*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990; and Amado Picardal, “Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: An Ecclesiological Perspective,” Ph.D. dissertation, Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University, 1992.

etc.). The ongoing struggle for integral human development, for justice and peace, and for compassion and solidarity among people was nationally recognized in the Philippines as imperative for all Christians, especially during the reign of terror and violence throughout the Marcos’ dictatorship. Faced with violence and institutional injustice from a corrupt and oppressive government with its repressive ideologies and socio-political structures, the Filipino people looked to the Church for support and guidance.<sup>11</sup>

It was at the height of Marcos dictatorship when Filipinos awakened in themselves a liberation orientation.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the pioneering experiences in the Diocese of Tagum in the late 1960s, replicated later on in the other dioceses, revolved around the village chapel. These evolved into the *Gagmayng Kristohanong Katilingban* (GKK) or Basic Christian Communities (BCC). At first, the people were organized for liturgical, paraliturgical, fiesta celebrations, and some pastoral initiatives. At the GKK level, there were later attempts to establish livelihood projects particularly in Mindanao, owing to the workings of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) and its Secretariat. Viewed by many bishops of Mindanao then as a radical pastoral project, they wanted nothing to do with it; some bishops however, were supportive of the BCC program. Later on, this model would be promoted primarily by the Basic Christian Community-Community Organizing (BCC-CO) Program. In the post-EDSA or the post-Marcos dictatorship era, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) was convened and its Acts and Decrees endorsed the Church of the Poor and the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). Thus, the former Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) became the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). Since then, the BEC framework was understood as a concrete translation of the Church of the Poor and a guide for Philippine Church pastoral efforts.

Until now, a question on the relevance and influence of BEC in the life of the Philippine Church finds no certain answer as there is currently an absence of impact evaluation of the PCP II as well as a comprehensive assessment of BECs throughout the country. As to the quantitative aspect

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<sup>11</sup>Marina Obal Altarejos, *Filipino Basic Ecclesial Community between Limitation and Self-Transcendence: A Lonergan-based Elucidation of Fundamental Spirituality*, Quezon City: Obraku Imprenta, 2007, 133.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Gaspar and Alberto Cacayan, “BCC as Vehicle for Salvation,” *MSPC Communication* 38 (November 1981).

of BECs, it is impressive<sup>13</sup> but one is not too sure about its qualitative aspect; one can only make tentative statements subject to validation. Moreover, there has been a current debate regarding the involvement of BECs in development projects, including those that respond to health and livelihood needs. While some believe that BECs should not be engaged in such projects for various reasons, others concede that it is necessary for BECs if they are to become truly serving communities, especially if the State is not doing something for the people and the poverty situation is aggravated by the prevalence of calamities.<sup>14</sup>

Amidst all these questions and concerns, the paper posits its proposition: the BEC (in its structural and teleological inception) is the suitable base for a compassion-based economics embodying the criteria of both the socio-cultural and moral-cultural properties. This is a bold assertion or even an improbable assumption if one is to describe and identify the “BEC” in this proposition as the one that is presently at work and currently practiced by majority of dioceses in the Philippines since there is admittedly a kind of misinterpretation or mis-application of the genuine thrusts of the BEC as conceived by PCP II. Limited to mere liturgical orientation (community Eucharistic celebrations, Bible sharing, image enthronement, community rosary, and the like), most of the BECs in the Philippines have not really reached that significant stage that can reflect “total human development.”<sup>15</sup>

## **8. Suitability of BEC as Base for Compassion-Inspired Economics**

This paper’s strong endorsement of BEC as the base for a compassionate economics may have to contend with some constraints. First, the Church

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<sup>13</sup>The number of dioceses that have adopted the formation of BECs as a pastoral priority has increased through the years. In 2002, there were 51 dioceses that participated in the BEC national assembly in Cebu. In 2005, there were 65 dioceses that sent delegates to the BEC national assembly. In 2008, there were 67 participating dioceses out of a total of 85 dioceses. Although, attendance of diocesan delegates in National Assemblies cannot be used as an accurate gauge for determining whether the BECs are regarded as pastoral priority by these dioceses, this can be used as an indicator. A more accurate data is forthcoming. Whatever the case, formation of BECs have been adopted as part of the vision-mission and goal of many dioceses. Amado Picardal, “The Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines: Recent Developments and Trends,” <<http://www.cbcpbec.com>> (8 Feb. 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Karl Gaspar, “Localization Resisting Globalization: Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the Postmodern Era,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 4 (2001), <<http://www.eapi.admu.edu.ph>> (28 Jan. 2013).

<sup>15</sup>Altarejos, *Filipino Basic Ecclesial Community*, 224-225.

where BEC is embedded is not into “economics.” Second, socio-cultural studies have identified the failure of BECs in most areas in the Philippines, especially those in the cities, as largely caused by the presence of strong capitalist market tendencies. For Ferdinand Dagmang, capitalism brings forth a culture that drives people out of BEC or at least makes it difficult for them to be communities of fellowship and solidarity as they are driven by market dynamics and requirements.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these obvious predicaments however, this paper argues that while it seems inevitable for these capitalist tendencies to leave the confines of today’s market communities where BEC is expected to live alongside it, then it seems pointless to envision a BEC that is purely context-independent of market scenarios and practices. On the contrary, it may even be logical (and even urgent) therefore to push for a stronger and unyielding engagement of BEC into socio-economic agendum. Why not create and form (small) neighbourhood markets based on BEC structures in such a way that substantivist values (kinship, religion, friendship, etc.) than formalist ones (profit, utilities, techniques, etc.) are upheld? With BEC’s active socio-economic engagement (livelihood projects, cooperatives, small stores, etc.), as economic alternatives, what is created are not only projects but additional opportunities and scenarios for interpersonal and communal contact and network. In this way, a culture of fellowship and solidarity may even be more feasible not in spite of but because of these additional opportunities based on socio-economic interactions.

Socio-culturally, such likelihood is even bolstered by indigenous practices like William Davis’ *suki* complex among Filipinos.<sup>17</sup> While *suki* may negatively connote, as in any other indigenous Filipino core values, increased sentiment or disposition for formation of exclusive groups that may tend to marginalize others outside the group, this paper looks at it from the group’s capacity to also practice inclusive solidarity. Its natural composition taking root from faith, Christological, and ecclesial orientations, BEC members who would engage in active socio-economic activities with *suki* and other Filipino core values like *hiya*, *pakikisama*,

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<sup>16</sup>Ferdinand Dagmang, “The Church of the Poor: Church Renewal through the BECs, Renewal for Catechesis and Religious Education,” Plenary paper presented in the First National Conference on Catechesis and Religious Education, Manila: DLSU, 2012.

<sup>17</sup>William Davis, *Social Relations in a Philippine Market: Self-Interest and Subjectivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

and *utang na loob* as embedded human dispositions are likely in better and stronger position to utilize these values towards communal solidarity and fellowship.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, it is argued that even if the Church is not into economics, the BEC (at least in PCP II articulation) is essentially capacitated towards a socio-economic agendum/engagement. Under this condition, a BEC can, for instance, extend into a cooperative that lends money for livelihood projects to help the members and even others in the area. In PCP II conciliar formulation, the discussion on “BEC” (par. 137-140) appears immediately after the “Church of the Poor” (par. 122-136). BEC is articulated with socio-economic nuances: “their concerns both *material* and *spiritual*” (par. 138) and “emerging at the grassroots among *poor farmers and workers*” (par. 139). While this paper argues for the concept of “integral development” as BEC’s mission for its members, there is no direct and explicit exhortation in PCP II document. Despite this, however, “integral development” (par. 293-296) is explained under the topic on “social doctrine of the Church,” which bears implicit references to BEC through the following explicitations: “... but *generating jobs for the unemployed, raising the standard of living, increasing the gross national product, providing economic sufficiency...*” (par. 293) and “This is why we cannot help but mention the neglect and even exploitation of the *poorest of the poor*, such as members of the tribal Filipino communities, of *seasonal sugarcane workers, or landless tillers and industrial workers and slum dwellers*” (par. 295). In short, the argument for BEC’s socio-economic agendum is premised on the vision of the Church of the Poor that provides not only economic liberation but total human development.

Another contention of suitability of BEC rests on the basis of the fourteen (14) social and moral cultural properties that define the appropriate base for a compassion-based economics (See Table 3). While one can find these properties in the historical and theoretical narratives of BEC, the degree of “evident-ness” of each property is clearly differentiated and therefore must be thoroughly qualified, defined, and validated.

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<sup>18</sup>There were studies that support the positive aspects of these Filipino cultural values. See Reynaldo Clemeña Ileta, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 1979 and Ferdinand Dagmang, “Hiya: Daan at Kakayahan sa Pakikipagkapwa,” *MST Review, Introductory Issue* (1996), 66-90.



At first glance, BEC seems to possess all the properties; closer introspection, however, shows that there are some of them that need further justification, precisely because it is not as obvious or evident as the rest. This paper takes note of the following properties that need further evaluation: non-profit motivation and sustainable (ecological) development in the area of socio-cultural frame, and capacity for institutional challenge in the moral-cultural frame. While BEC may not be popularly known to claim the aforementioned properties, a more extensive research and literature review would reveal that these properties are structurally included, perhaps implicitly, in the design and praxis of BEC.

On the *non-profit motivation*, the BECs are expected to transcend or exceed the stage of liturgical worship (traditionally identified with BECs) and become serving communities for the people at large. By opening the communities to the broader concerns of the “secular” community and the other economic problems, and since most of the families are poor, communities started to concern themselves with organizing cooperatives, livelihood projects, credit unions, agricultural productivity, etc.<sup>19</sup> The socio-economic aspect of BEC dynamics is a response to its core axiom of “total human development.” In a report by Amado Picardal, executive secretary of the CBCP Commission on BECs, a survey conducted before the 2008 BEC National Assembly has showed responses from 40 dioceses, 93% of the whom have initiated BEC-based pro-poor programs, e.g. livelihood projects, microfinance, small enterprises, cooperatives, feeding programs, etc.<sup>20</sup> While it is true that like in any other community-based cooperatives or government-initiated livelihood projects, the BEC-based social programs may have the need to generate profit but not in the way capitalist corporations and enterprises understand it. Profits or surpluses, while clearly secondary, are regarded as a welcome side-effect (indirect consequence) that if properly mobilized can be utilized as a revolving fund among many possible options that can further promote and reinforce the primordial aim of helping those in need to not be in want. The motivation is to contribute for the common good while taking in profit as mere incidental or auxiliary.

On *sustainable (ecological) development*, the BECs in the Philippines are also known to engage in programs and movements that promote ecology and environmental conservation.<sup>21</sup> Aside from the fact

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<sup>19</sup>Altarejos, *Filipino Basic Ecclesial Community*, 224.

<sup>20</sup>Picardal, *Recent Developments and Trends*.

<sup>21</sup>Picardal, *Recent Developments and Trends*.

that communities of this kind emerge from grassroots, their localized context brings along with it the natural care for environment and their cooperative model carries with it their mobilization of local and indigenous resources. The strong communion of shared life among members of these communities is found to extend even to the environment that they live in and reside. Since most of the raw materials and resources they use for their livelihood are obtained from the nature around them, moderation and gradualism have become standing principles that guide their activity.

On *capacity for institutional challenge*, it has already been mentioned how BECs (formerly BCCs) took root right in the very heart of the Christian community amidst the oppression and injustices inflicted on the people by the Marcos dictatorial regime under Martial Law. These communities became immersed in addressing various societal concerns and issues involving the violation of human rights and other forms of injustices. A form of resistance to the long historical effect of colonization to Filipino culture and practice, particularly the so-called “culture of silence and dependence,” the BECs must be able to promote and live out the values that can break away from the status quo.<sup>22</sup> Case in point is the emergence of BCCs in the Diocese of Tagum in the early inception of such faith-based communities. The newly-ordained local priests, motivated to find their own strategy for pastoral work, introduced their own individual style of effecting pastoral changes “but all were motivated by the desire to change the status quo and implement the principles of dialogue, participation and co-responsibility set by Vatican II.”<sup>23</sup>

The elucidation of some of these properties clearly reinforces the distinction of BEC as the suitable base for a compassion-inspired economics. With all the qualities of a compassionate economics structurally and teleologically situated in the BEC as the base, the only concern is the feasibility of its actual and proper implementation. Based on a 1995 report by the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), there were only about 34.47% of the BECs in the Philippines that were engaged in the process of social transformation.<sup>24</sup> This figure hardly reached a

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<sup>22</sup>Altarejos, *Filipino Basic Ecclesial Community*, 239.

<sup>23</sup>George Rimando, “Basic Christian Communities: Tagum Experience,” an article written for the Lay Formation & Training Center, Diocese of Tagum, Davao, October 4, 1996, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Amado Picardal, “The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as Means for Social Transformation,” <<http://becsphil.tripod.com>> (2 Feb. 2013).

critical mass that can substantially change Philippine society. However, 2008 figures and reports by NASSA had shown significant increase among the dioceses that have accepted a more holistic and integral vision of BECs. As this data hardly provide an accurate picture of the actual number of BECs, admittedly, there is still a big gap between this vision and the reality among many of the BECs. But an optimistic and encouraging future is clearly possible with BEC’s appropriation of the 14 cultural properties that correspond to a vision of compassion-based economics at least among the small narratives along the margins.

### **9. Perceived Limitations of a BEC-EC**

Despite this paper’s confidence in a BEC-based economics of compassion (BEC-EC), there are certain limitations or cautions that must be clarified. First, BEC-EC has no intention even in the years ahead to replace or become a substitute to the ‘dominant’ mainstream economics that is clearly identified with neoliberal capitalism and mathematized neoclassicism. Second, BEC-EC is proffered as an economic alternative among the many emerging non-standard models and frameworks that exist alongside the grand narrative of neoliberalism. The proposed BEC-EC is more focused on maintaining a degree of humanized communal existence within and among the small communities of people. Third, BEC-EC is not designed to be a grand or universal framework that must homogenize all small communities as the dominant and controlling narrative for all. It allows varieties in forms and dynamics given the different contexts, cultural artefacts, and traditional values that are embedded in every community or neighbourhood.

Aside from the aforementioned, the most important clarification of a BEC-EC framework is that with BEC as the suitable base, it only means that BEC will provide a “structural framework” for an economics of compassion. As a structural framework, BEC does not only serve to concretize the vision of the Church of the Poor but also economics of compassion. In other words, a community must first establish a strong bond among one another in faith and spiritual communion, with deep and sincere human connection and interaction. Since most BECs in the Philippines are initially functioning in liturgical-praying dynamics, one has to guarantee that all the 14 cultural properties are strongly reinforced before progressing in a BEC-EC dynamics. In this way, a strong foundational structure may avoid the pitfalls of alienating tendencies of the

globalized market narratives. Hence, the existence of an economics of compassion requires the BEC as the foundation and base.

As a BEC-EC, it can actually integrate the features of a cooperative model that is usually manifest in many of the sector-based community cooperatives in the Philippines (credit, consumer, producers, service, and multi-purpose among many). Primordially a BEC and secondarily an EC, in structural and foundational order, the community may opt not to adopt any economic model and simply pattern itself after the first Jerusalem community, where no one was in want (Acts 4:34) because everyone shared out of love. With an adoption of a cooperative model, however, one must by all means uphold that it would not in any way destroy the BEC structural base. The vigour of an EC dynamics rests on the strength of its BEC foundation inasmuch as the failure of an EC dynamics reflects the limited capacity of its BEC in fulfilling its most crucial thrust of total human development.

## **10. Conclusion**

What is distinctively interesting in this paper amidst those who have ventured into contributing models and frameworks for non-standard economic alternatives is its religious/theological theoretical foundation to promote an agendum of a compassion-based economics. Its interdisciplinary approach to offer a framework for an economic alternative that is situated within an unfamiliar and strange ecclesial space would not only be beneficial for the science of economics but also to the promotion of church-based initiatives, particularly those that pertain with building and maintenance of the BECs, at least in the Philippines.

There is still much to be studied and analyzed especially in the aspect of practicability and actual implementation but further researches can handle such especially that there have been already some pilot-testing in some areas in the country, particularly in the Mindanao regions. This paper's proposal for a BEC-EC is perceived as a socio-cultural shift in the way BEC incorporates a strong socio-economic thrust in the context of its inherent call towards total human development. This paper argues that if only BEC would realize its vision of a Church of the Poor through integral development of people, the rationale for BEC's active socio-economic engagement is herewith provided and would be sufficiently justified to challenge those with constant objections or apprehensions over an economically-inclined BEC dynamics.