

## **BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES Pathways for Ecumenical Collaboration**

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**Abstract:** The Basic Ecclesial Communities, being centered on the Sacred Scriptures, visibly manifest the essential elements of the ecumenical fraternity. The article illustrates their historical development and theological foundations. Then it analyses the ecumenical initiatives inspired by the decree on ecumenism. Further, it invites the readers to view them as expressions of ecumenically diversified unity on the essentials and promotes the dialogue of life, action, discourse, spirituality, and proclamation at the grassroots.

**Keywords:** BECs, Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Participatory Church, Gospel Sharing, Aparecida document

### **Introduction**

This article explores the ways in which the ecumenical vision of the Second Vatican Council is sustained by the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) at the grassroots. The first section explains the origin and historical development of the BECs, the role of the episcopal conferences in establishing them, and their influence on the pastoral life of the Catholics in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. It analyses the theological foundations of these communities and

their relevance for the Church in the third millennium. The second section sheds light on the ecumenical vision of the Catholic Church illustrated in the *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR), Decree on Ecumenism. Further, this section makes a few observations by which the ecumenical journey did not achieve the desired result. The conclusion delves into the possibilities by which these communities could become an initiative for the restoration of Christian unity and ecumenical collaboration.

### 1. Basic Ecclesial Communities

The BECs,<sup>1</sup> similar to the ecclesial communities of the early churches,<sup>2</sup> nurture the faith of the community. They are a group of believers in a particular neighbourhood. They differ greatly among themselves both within the same region and even more from one region to another. They gather in intimate groups for prayer<sup>3</sup> to share their personal and faith experiences.<sup>4</sup> By their participation, the members learn to appreciate diversified unity and to work in collaboration.<sup>5</sup> They broaden their perspectives on life, persons, and understanding of God. The members could also include people of other denominations as well as other religions, forming Small Human Communities in the neighbourhood as the situations call for.<sup>6</sup> In these communities, the Spirit of Jesus guides and directs individual believers as well as the whole

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, 'Basic Ecclesial Communities' will be used in the general sense replacing 'Small Christian communities.'

<sup>2</sup> Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelisation of the Poor* (New York: Orbis books, 1984), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Arockia Dhas Rayappan, "A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay," (Unpublished Masters Thesis; Jnana Deepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Pune, 2012), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Oswald Hirmer, *Gospel-Sharing: Its Origin, Description and Theological Concept* (Nagpur: PAC Publication, 1990), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Valerian Arumainayagam, *Kudumbabe Anbiyatin Uyirnaadi* (Nagercoil: Assisi Offset Press, 2016), 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

community. They grow into authentic discipleship in their given context.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.1 Historical Development of BECs**

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a renewal and growth of the faith communities in small local initiatives through the BECs. The Second Vatican Council became a great impetus to the growth of these BECs in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe.<sup>8</sup>

#### ***1.1.1 BECs in Americas: Church of the Periphery and Social Transformation***

The BECs first made their appearance in South America in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup> The members hailed from the forgotten people of the interior and the outskirts of cities. In South America, faith and praxis are the two inseparable sides of the face of the Church. There was no well-drafted plan for their initiation, development, and establishment as a movement. Their emergence was a spontaneous development inspired by the Holy Spirit. The trend to form them emerged first in grassroots communities for the purpose of the promotion of social upliftment and community evangelization. They originated out of the need for people to experience a deeper sense of community, especially people living in thousands of villages where a priest appeared very rarely.

In communion with the Church leaders, the ordinary Catholics searched for a way to practice their faith amidst extreme poverty, suffering, exploitation, violence, and a longing for liberation at the

<sup>7</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, "National Service Team (NST) for SCCs," in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 97-102.

<sup>8</sup> Alphonse Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking: A Historical Journey of SCCs," in *Breaking Ground Papers Presented at the International Theological Congress on Small Christian Communities*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Francis Scaria, and Elvin Colaco (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2014), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Richard R Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 122.

same time.<sup>10</sup> Their strong concern for human dignity, social justice, freedom from oppression by the ruling class, and a new sense of being part of the Church were the principal factors. The years of industrialization and political change led to a huge migration of rural folk to cities in search of jobs creating large slums of the poor and labour classes. Three popular movements of the era, viz., *Peoples' Catechetical Movement (PCM)*, *Basic Education Movement (BEM)*, and *Better World Movement (BWM)*<sup>11</sup> contributed to the development of the BECs in the South American Continent.<sup>12</sup> The BECs in South America now number between 180,000 and 200,000 groups.<sup>13</sup>

The BECs in North America had their beginning in the diocese of San Bernardino in the form of Small Faith Communities.<sup>14</sup> South American immigrants who came to Southern California brought with them the experiences of the BECs. It was their source of strength and identity through which they could find a place in American culture. Through the initiative of Father Jose Palicki, smaller faith communities were established known as Jesus' Friends through his Valley Missionary Program.<sup>15</sup>

### ***1.1.2 BECs in Africa: A New Way of Being Church, Church in Neighbourhood***

The emergence of the BECs played an important role in the amazing growth of the Church in Africa.<sup>16</sup> The episcopal conferences in Africa played a vital role in establishing and promoting the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) to express the Church in a

<sup>10</sup> *DIIPA Introductory Workshop* (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2015), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking," 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> James O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking," 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 123.

meaningful Christian Communion.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of establishing the SCCs was to incarnate the Church into African culture.<sup>18</sup> Due to large territorial parishes, priests' attention to mission stations was minimal, which the Pentecostal churches exploited it by indulging in *sheep stealing*.<sup>19</sup> The Maryknoll Fathers responded to this challenge by asking Jassy to do research on the social structures and community values of the Luo Ethnic Group.<sup>20</sup> Through her research, it was brought to light that *there were some places - where the faithful lived as small faith communities wherein they felt belonged to - though the priest was absent*.

The Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) made the SCCs their pastoral priority. They viewed the BECs as a means to incarnate the Church.<sup>21</sup> The Lumko Institute of South Africa (LISA)<sup>22</sup> gave the Church a new vision called *A New Way of Being Church*.<sup>23</sup> Today the African Church provides rich experience and teaching on the Church in the neighbourhood. Lumko was founded to promote pastoral activities. In 1978, Father Hirmer<sup>24</sup> was entrusted with the responsibility for the Biblical Apostolate for the thirty dioceses

<sup>17</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, December 8, 1975, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Vijay SAC, "Introduction to the Third Edition," in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking," 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Lumko is the pastoral institute of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC). Until 1985, it was situated in the diocese of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. Now it is in Germiston near Johannesburg.

<sup>23</sup> Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking," 6.

<sup>24</sup> Oswald Hirmer from Germany is a bishop of the Umtata diocese. He, as a missionary priest, volunteered to serve the Church in South Africa. He is one of the persons who contributed significantly to develop the Lumko Missiological Institute of South Africa. His love for Asia made him spend a lot of his time in Asia and develop AsIPA programs for promoting participatory church structures through BECs.

belonging to the South African Catholic Bishop's Conference (SACBC).<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, he was appointed as the National Director of the Catholic Biblical Federation to conduct Bible courses in order to strengthen the faith of the people.<sup>26</sup>

Father Hirmer and his friend Father Lobinger developed the *4 step Gospel sharing* for the common illiterate people to understand the Gospel message.<sup>27</sup> The 4 step Gospel sharing made a great impact on those who had already been influenced by the Pentecostal preachers and had some experience of Gospel sharing. Later it was developed into the 7 steps Gospel-sharing method.<sup>28</sup> This method of Gospel sharing became very popular in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Gradually Lumko Institute started publishing relevant materials on Gospel sharing. This has been the specific contribution of the African Church to the Biblical Apostolate and Evangelization.<sup>29</sup> The SCCs were wholeheartedly supported by the African Synod of bishops. They encourage the members to take on responsibility and learn to live in an ecclesial life in the light of the Gospel.<sup>30</sup>

### ***1.1.3 BECs in Asia: Participatory Church Envisioned by the Second Vatican Council***

The Holy Spirit has actively guided the Asian Church by providing inspiration, resources, and organisational networks to plan consistently to make the vision of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) a reality in the lives of the people.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Hirmer, *Gospel-Sharing*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Thainese, "We Create the Path by Walking," 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas (Vijay) Varickamthotty SAC, *The Relationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Small Christian Community* (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2013), 11.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican website, September 14, 1995, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_14091995\\_ecclesia-in-africa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html) (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>31</sup> FABC Office of Laity & Family, "Bishops' Institute on Lay Apostolate

As mentioned earlier, LISA is instrumental in developing the methods of building the BECs and of forming leaders in the BECs.<sup>32</sup> In 1990, the Bishops of Asia spoke of *A New Way of Being Church* where clergy, laity, and religious consider each other as sisters and brothers.<sup>33</sup> It is a *participatory Church* where the gifts and charisms, given by the Holy Spirit to all, are recognized and activated to build the Body of Christ, the Church in the neighbourhood, to fulfill her mission in that place and time.<sup>34</sup> It ensures participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church.<sup>35</sup>

Inspired by the pastoral vision of the BECs, Bishop Peter Kang of South Korea described the BECs as “a fundamental methodology or process in South Korea in order to proceed towards an ideal image of the Church which the Second Vatican Council suggested.”<sup>36</sup> Though the South American experience with the BECs had its impact on churches in other parts of the world, the experience of the SCCs in Africa was more inspirational in the development of the BECs in Asia. The 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC at Bandung in Indonesia in 1990 was the turning point for the BECs in Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Hirmer from South Africa was invited to facilitate sessions on “A New Way of Being Church in Asia” in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> These

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(BILA) on SCCs,” in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D’Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 87.

<sup>32</sup> Daesup Kim, *The Church as Communion in Small Christian Communities in South Korea* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of America, 2011), 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Journeying Together Towards the Third Millennium: The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference 1990* (Bandung: FABC, 2003), 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>35</sup> FABC Office of Laity & Family, “Bishops’ Institute on Lay Apostolate (BILA) on SCCs,” 87.

<sup>36</sup> Kim, *The Church as Communion in Small Christian Communities in South Korea*, 235.

<sup>37</sup> Thainese, “We Create the Path by Walking,” 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Lumko sessions encouraged the bishops of Asia to declare the BECs a pastoral priority for Asia and to open a desk within the FABC Office of Laity for the promotion of BECs.<sup>39</sup> Hirmer himself formed a team of delegates from the dioceses in Asia<sup>40</sup> and prepared programmes suitable for the Asian context which he called Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA).<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II affirms in *Redemptoris Missio* that the Synod Fathers underlined the value of BECs as an effect of promoting communion and participation in parishes and Dioceses, and as a genuine force for evangelization.<sup>42</sup> Now both the African and Asian experiences with the BECs are an inspiration for the European Church to search for their own ways of building small communities (RM 51).<sup>43</sup>

## 1.2 Theological Foundation of BECs

The BECs are concrete expressions of the Church, true expressions of communion, source of new hope for the Church, instruments of evangelization, sources for new ministries (RM 51), self-sustaining churches, and communion of domestic churches. They are the smallest cell of the Church.<sup>44</sup> They are on the side of the poor and marginalized.<sup>45</sup> The LISA gave four characteristic marks to the BECs to distinguish them from other parish groups.<sup>46</sup> These

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Varickamthotty, *The Relationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Small Christian Community*, 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate*, December 7, 1990, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html) (accessed on 28.03.2024).

<sup>43</sup> Varickamthotty, *The Relationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Small Christian Community*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Selvester Ponnnumuthan, "Basic/Small Christian Communities: A Concrete Expression of the Local Church in India," in *SCCs are Ministering Communities*, ed. Thomas Vijay SAC (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2013), 72.

<sup>45</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, "National Service Team (NST) for SCCs," 103.

<sup>46</sup> Rayappan, *A Scientific Study on the Effectiveness of the SCCs in the Archdiocese of Bombay*, 11-12.



characteristics are shared by all BECs in Asia. They are: (a) The members of the BECs are neighbours; (b) The BECs share the Gospel; (c) The BECs act together; and (d) The BECs are united with the universal Church through the parish.

Members of the BECs are neighbours. They meet in homes at regular intervals (weekly or monthly) to share the Gospel. They follow the command of Jesus to serve the least in the community (Mt 25:40) and promote the values of the Kingdom of God found in the Bible. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on 23 April 1993, reads thus: The BECs “focus their gatherings upon the Bible and set themselves a threefold objective: to know the Bible, to create community and to serve the people.”<sup>47</sup>

### **1.2.1 BECs: Bible-Centred Communities**

The BECs create a setting in the communities by which Christians develop more interest in the Word of God. They provide a place where we grow in our experience of new interpersonal relationships in the faith and deeper exploration of the Word of God. They bring about an evaluation of lifestyle and reflection on the reality in the light of the Gospel. They celebrate the Word of God in daily life. They seek to be nourished by the Word of God.<sup>48</sup> In turn, the BECs are deeply nurtured through the Word of God and the sharing of the lived experiences of their members.<sup>49</sup> They are Bible-based.

Bible/Gospel sharing is a vital constituent and necessary foundation of community life in the BECs. Jesus is the centre of

<sup>47</sup> East African Bishops' Conferences, “Bishops' Conferences on SCCs,” in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 19.

<sup>48</sup> Jose Marins, Teolide Maria Trevisan, and Carolee Chanona, *The Church from the Roots: Basic Ecclesial Communities* (London: CADOD, 1989), 19.

<sup>49</sup> AsIPA General Assembly V, “Do this in Memory of Me (Luke 22.19): Bread Broken and Word Shared in SCCs,” in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 69.

every BECs.<sup>50</sup> Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, the Risen Lord Jesus is present in a very powerful way. In the BECs, he is present through the Word of God. The BECs are nourished by the Word of God. Each member of the BEC is united with the Word and the Word in turn unites them with one another. Thus, the Spirit of the Living God living among his people builds them into his holy temple, spiritual building, giving them as an ecclesial body of Christ.

Gospel Sharing helps the BEC participants to listen devoutly to the loving voice of Jesus in and through the words of the Scriptures and to share their experience of Jesus with the group.<sup>51</sup> The members who attend the Gospel sharing regularly build a strong well-knit community. In the Gospel Sharing the members of BECs experience the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst. They become aware of the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets, who comes near, dwells graciously within them, and prepares them for mission. They become aware of the Holy Spirit who reveals to them God's plans, eternally and perpetually designed, for their sanctification and the salvation of the whole world.

### ***1.2.2 BECs: Evangelizing and Participative Communities***

The BECs are a force for evangelization and an effective means of promoting participation.<sup>52</sup> Evangelizing means bringing good news into all strata of humanity.<sup>53</sup> Evangelization is a communitarian

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas J. Netto, "Theological Basis for SCCs," in *Breaking Ground Papers Presented at the International Theological Congress on Small Christian Communities*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Francis Scaria, and Elvin Colaco (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2014), 69.

<sup>51</sup> Varickamthotty, *The Relationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Small Christian Community*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> AsIPA General Assembly VI, "Go, You Are Sent Forth! Following Jesus in Mission: Small Christian Communities Serving and Ministering," in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 76.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Vijay SAC, *SCCs are Instruments of Evangelization* (Nagpur: PAC Centre, 2007), 5.

task that begins in the community itself before being shared with others.<sup>54</sup> It is a process through which we become Good News for others. The Good News is expressed in the values Jesus gave us. Evangelization also means preserving creation as per God's design and understanding nature as God's gift to humanity.<sup>55</sup> Evangelization is sharing our hope, our life, and our joy, which we have received from Jesus.<sup>56</sup> The participants in the BECs being self-evangelized by the Word of God become the cause and reason, the salt and light of the ongoing evangelization in their neighbourhood. The BECs are indeed evangelizing communities<sup>57</sup> and agents of evangelization.

Evangelization cannot happen without an ongoing conversion in the hearts of evangelizers. The BECs create a climate for such an ongoing conversion in the lives of their members through the sharing of the Word and faith in their life context.<sup>58</sup> They are now becoming places, focal points, and vehicles for evangelization. In the process of spelling out the ultimate meaning and value at stake in the evangelization of the poor, the Church discovers its fullest identity; in it the Church discovers the Lord.

The BECs provide a real experience of participation, a sense of what it means to become a subject in one's own history. By insertion into the concrete reality of their lives, the Gospel is prompting the BECs to create new forms of life, and in a joint endeavour, to invent new types of open, committed, and fraternal communities. In the BECs, the most fundamental vocation of the Catholics as the proclaimers of the Gospel is accomplished as they hear the Gospel proclaimed to them.<sup>59</sup> There are times and

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>57</sup> AsIPA General Assembly VI, "Go, You Are Sent Forth," 72.

<sup>58</sup> Varickamthotty, *The Relationship Between Sunday Eucharist and Small Christian Community*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, December 8, 1975, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-)

circumstances in the history of the Church when the Gospel is heard and accepted as the Good News of the Kingdom, in its original newness. On such occasions, the Gospel demonstrates its force for liberation and salvation, giving sight to blind eyes, opening deaf ears, untying mute tongues, and stirring and converting consciences and hearts. All this occurs when the poor hear the Good News.<sup>60</sup>

The presence of BECs has contributed to the evangelization for the Church as a whole. Evangelization thus leads to holistic participation of the members of the BECs. Through the BECs, the Church is moving towards decentralization, assuring increased participation by the laity in the parishes and the dioceses.<sup>61</sup>

The BECs are a participatory Church in which gifts the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful are recognized and activated.<sup>62</sup> In the early period of the Church, there was a real participative community in which all the members had a say in making of important decisions keeping in mind the common good.<sup>63</sup> In the apostolic times, when some serious problems cropped up affecting the Church, the assembly of the faithful was convoked to find a fraternal consensus. For instance, Matthias was elected as one of the twelve to replace Judas Iscariot at a meeting of the community in which about one hundred and twenty believers including women took part (Acts 1:14-15). The participation of the whole community was more clearly revealed in the appointment of the seven deacons to take care of the widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The issue was one of doing what justice demanded in the practice of love (Acts 6:1-6). The Council of Jerusalem was convoked to resolve an

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vi\_exh\_19751208\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>60</sup> Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>62</sup> FABC V, "Bandung Conference 1990," in *Church Teachings on SCCs*, eds. Thomas Vijay SAC, Agnes Chawadi, and Joseph D'Souza (Nagpur: PAC Publications, 2006), 24.

<sup>63</sup> Netto, "Theological Basis for SCCs," 70.

insurmountable difference of opinion about whether circumcision was necessary for salvation or not. This major controversy in the Church on the admission of the Gentiles to the Church was solved through a process of discernment involving the people of God, facilitated by Peter and the Apostles, expressing the collegial character of the early Church (Acts 15).<sup>64</sup>

Genuine participation nurtures ecclesial co-responsibility, and also principles of communion, collegiality, and co-responsibility in relation to the role of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. The BECs provide a pastoral structure in which the lay faithful actively participate in the Church as subjects.

### 3. Ecumenical Vision of the Catholic Church

The ecumenical movement was born out of a shared vision<sup>65</sup> that includes the initiatives and activities that promote Christian unity (UR 1).<sup>66</sup> Though the Catholic Church is not officially a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) which was created in 1948, it regularly collaborates with WCC.<sup>67</sup> Ecumenical works on a broader level include prayer, service to the poor, ministry to the needy, and other works of mercy – like pro-life causes.<sup>68</sup>

#### 3.1 Contributive Factors of the Ecumenical Movement in the Catholic Church

Jesus makes it possible to live as sisters and brothers by helping us to recognize a single Father who is in heaven.<sup>69</sup> Jesus Christ,

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>65</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree On Ecumenism*, Vatican website, November 21, 1964, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>67</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> J.W. Atencio, “Christian unity: ‘A work and gift of the Holy Spirit,’ say ecumenical leaders,” *Angelus*, Oct 23, 2013, <https://angelusnews.com/local/california/christian-unity-a-work-and-gift-of-the-holy-spirit-say-ecumenical-leaders/> (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>69</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, November 6, 1999, <https://www.vatican.va/>

Master and Saviour, deeply desired unity among his followers while he was still on earth. He prayed: “All may be one, as you Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:21). As a heavenly and celestial intercessor, he continues to pray for the realization and restoration of unity among Christians and continues to knock at the door of the hearts of every believer. Saint Paul reminded the Christians of their spiritual obligation to remain together in unity. He boldly exclaimed: “For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

The ecumenical movement of the Catholic Church had to await the pontificate of John XXIII before it could surface with official blessing.<sup>70</sup> He personally wished that the Council addressed the sad divisions that existed in Christianity.<sup>71</sup> At the Council, the Catholics saw themselves as searching, sojourning, and pilgrim Church.<sup>72</sup> The consciousness of sacramentality of the Church informed the Council’s thinking on the relationship between Roman Catholicism and other Christian churches.<sup>73</sup> The Fathers of the Church at the Council were of the view that many efforts are being made in prayer, word, and action to attain that fullness of unity that Jesus Christ desires. They exhorted us to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism (UR 4).

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[content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html) (accessed on 21.02.2023).

<sup>70</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1970), 647-648

<sup>71</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 109.

<sup>72</sup> Michael A. Fahey, “A Promising New Thrust in Ecumenical Theology,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 186.

<sup>73</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 111.

It is to be noted that this decree on Ecumenism applies only to Christians, and the considerations in it are intentioned for prudent ecumenical action (UR 13). The Dominican Yves Congar authored several ground-breaking ecumenical studies by the time the Council was convoked.<sup>74</sup> According to him, Christ and the Holy Spirit are the real authors of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council because they are the common act of the assembled college.<sup>75</sup> The Council Fathers could no longer ignore the ecumenical movements. They were led to respond to the yearning of the Christians that longed for the realization of Christian Unity.

### **3.2 Ecumenical Vision of the Second Vatican Council: Decree on Ecumenism**

Ecumenical dialogue is the vocation of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>76</sup> It is a crucial building block for the Church of the future. The non-Catholic (ecumenical) observers numbered 180 at the Second Vatican Council.<sup>77</sup> They were of the view that the Council was a moment of renewal for the Catholic Church.<sup>78</sup> It changed the landscape of Christianity in a profound way.<sup>79</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, is one of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council. It elicited new confidence in the ecumenical relationships by developing three points:

The ethical doctrine of religious freedom as a human right (personal and collective); a political doctrine with regard to the functions and limits of government in matters of religious;

<sup>74</sup> Elaine Catherine MacMillan, "Vatican II and the Twentieth Century's 'Conciliar Renaissance'," in *Vatican II Forty Years Later*, ed. William Madges (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 250.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (trans. Anne Englund Nash; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 346.

<sup>77</sup> Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

and the theological doctrine of the freedom of the Church as the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and the socio-political order.<sup>80</sup>

In fact, UR represents a watershed moment in the history of the Church in terms of its articulation of the relationship between Church and state, and its affirmation of pluralism as a consequence of religious tolerance, freedom of conscience, and religious freedom.<sup>81</sup> The then prevalent socio-political-religious environment was very much discouraging for ecumenical initiatives. During the Council, the Council Fathers were hopeful that an ecumenical spirit and mutual esteem would gradually increase among all Christians<sup>82</sup> though the Council was convoked at the tail end of about one hundred years of intense conciliar activity in the mainline churches.<sup>83</sup> The Decree concretely and authoritatively provided the positive motive for the Catholic Church's ecumenical engagements, directions, and the guidelines for ecumenical initiatives.<sup>84</sup>

One of the concrete Catholic initiatives was the creation of the secretariat for Christian Unity in 1960.<sup>85</sup> The seeds of the ecumenical development were planted at the Second Vatican Council.<sup>86</sup> The correlation of the recognition of churches and ministry suggests further possibilities for ecumenical progress.<sup>87</sup> One of the primary concerns of the Council was to restore unity among the Christians. The division among Christians openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages

<sup>80</sup> Susan K. Wood, "Ecumenism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 290.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>82</sup> Flannery, *Vatican II*, 518.

<sup>83</sup> MacMillan, "Vatican II and the Twentieth Century's 'Conciliar Renaissance'," 247.

<sup>84</sup> E. Radner, "The inheritance of Unitatis Redintegratio: critical questions for Anglicans," *Taylor & Francis Online*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1474225X.2014.988421/> (accessed on 25.02.2023).

<sup>85</sup> Gaillardetz, *Eccelesiology for a Global Church*, 109.

<sup>86</sup> Wood, "Ecumenism," 295.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.



the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature (UR 1). The Decree on Ecumenism frankly admits that present-day Roman-Catholics share the blame for the divisions that exist in Christianity.<sup>88</sup> They long for the one visible Church of God that would cause the conversion and salvation of the world (UR 1). The Church is an eschatological community.<sup>89</sup> The Council Fathers urged the Catholic Christians to avoid all that could cause harm to true progress toward the restoration of the unity among the Christians. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that the children of the Catholic Church accept the separated brethren as brothers and sisters in the Lord with respect and affection.<sup>90</sup>

The Christian way of life is strengthened by the grace of baptism and by hearing the Word of God. It expresses itself in private prayer, in meditation on the Scripture, in the life of a Christian family, and in the worship of the community gathered together in the Eucharist. This faith bears fruit in praise and thanksgiving for the benefits received from the hands of God with a deep sense of justice and true charity towards others. Their active faith makes an immense contribution for the relief of spiritual and material distress, the advancement of the education of youth the improvement of social conditions of life, and the promotion of peace throughout the world. It is highly encouraged to start the ecumenical dialogue with the moral application of the Gospel (UR 23).

This can precisely be done with the help of the BECs. The FABC proposes that the multifaceted realities create unique ministerial situations that call for the BECs to evolve new forms of pertinent ministries as an apt response to their genuine concerns:

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<sup>88</sup> Fahey, "A Promising New Thrust in Ecumenical Theology," 186.

<sup>89</sup> R. McBrien, "Vatican II themes: The church as an eschatological community," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 22, 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/vatican-ii-themes-church-eschatological-community/> (accessed on 25.02.2023).

<sup>90</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 818.

the ministry of healing; dialoguing with other Christians and people of other faiths; helping migrants and internally displaced people; providing homes to the orphans of war; empowering abandoned women; fighting against nuclear power; working for justice, peace, and reconciliation; defending the rights of individuals, groups, and nationalities; creating new opportunities for the unemployed; fighting against corruption; ministering to the youth who have left the church; taking care of the abandoned elderly, etc.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.3 Certain Observations on the Decree on Ecumenism

At times, the ecumenical movement gets dampened and does not steadily march ahead towards the desired realization of Christian unity<sup>92</sup> though the Catholic Church is irreversibly committed to Ecumenism. The Catholic Church has much to learn from the synodal and conciliar traditions of other churches.<sup>93</sup>

To experience and to become active promoters and participants of the Ecumenical initiatives, it is highly recommended that we could reflect on the following three elements from the teaching of the Decree on Ecumenism:

...the role of the holy Spirit in bringing about greater church unity, the role to be played by every member of the church in the work of ecumenism, and the need for personal self-examination to see whether in any possible way, through harmful language, prejudice, or laziness, Catholics themselves stand as an obstacle to greater church unity.<sup>94</sup>

When the Church is either on a journey or a pilgrimage, there will inevitably be movement and changes along the way. We could joyfully respond by accompanying the people who need us the most and by bringing in attitudinal changes within ourselves.

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<sup>91</sup> AsIPA General Assembly VI, "Go, You Are Sent Forth," 76-77.

<sup>92</sup> Wood, "Ecumenism," 295-296.

<sup>93</sup> MacMillan, "Vatican II and the Twentieth Century's 'Conciliar Renaissance'," 257.

<sup>94</sup> Fahey, "A Promising New Thrust in Ecumenical Theology," 186.

One may be led to ask why remarkable statements from the Decree on Ecumenism have had so little impact on contributing to full, visible unity within churches. The ecumenical initiatives have witnessed not only healing advances but also painful frustrations.

The texts are not widely known except among specialists in ecumenical theology and are often available only in specialized publications; the language of these texts is probably too technical for even the well-disposed churchgoer; the sponsoring ecclesial authorities that mandated the commissions have not generally responded to them competently, much less ever cited their conclusions in the life of their respective churches; and even in divinity schools for the training of the clergy and religious educators, the texts are rarely incorporated into the core curriculum.<sup>95</sup>

Inspired by the Aparecida document of the Magisterium of the Church, we could include preferential option for the poor, work against poverty, injustice, ecological degradation, and exploitation of any kind<sup>96</sup> in ecumenical activities. Christian unity originates from our longing to be of service to others.<sup>97</sup> We wish to serve as Jesus did throughout his life, especially during the Last Supper when he washed the feet of his disciples. The Decree affirms that unity does not mean uniformity and issues a fervent call to all the Christians to work together for the promotion of social justice and peace (UR 12).<sup>98</sup> The FABC promulgates that the BECs, at its depth, prepares us for ecumenical dialogue.<sup>99</sup>

### Conclusion

Though the BECs are moments and movements of grace, they are yet to realize their full potential to bring to fruition the ecumenical

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>96</sup> James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish* (Toronto: Novalis, 2014), 37.

<sup>97</sup> Atencio, "Christian unity."

<sup>98</sup> Fahey, "A Promising New Thrust in Ecumenical Theology," 186.

<sup>99</sup> FABC V, "Bandung Conference 1990," 26.

vision of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council. These initiatives are being shaped through the inspiration and wisdom of the Council Fathers, found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and through the emerging ecclesiologies. As we prepare to celebrate the Jubilee Year 2025, let us leave no stone unturned to draw the living water from the resources of the Decree on Ecumenism and the other documents of the Council to deepen the understanding of Christian Unity that is becoming a reality through the openness, receptivity, and magnanimity from the part of the believers to be part of a synodal Church that listens and is humble. Through the ecumenical movement, the BECs would significantly contribute to the International Christian formation. The ecumenical commitment of these communities will respond to the signs of the times to work from within the world to help the world realize its full potential.

May Jesus' words in the Gospels be our guiding post in this sojourn towards the realization of Christian Unity through the BECs: "All may be one, as you Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn 17:21). "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). "I have come so that you may have life, life to the full" (Jn 10:10).