

**A Biblico-Theological Reflection  
on the Subthemes of the Quadrennial Theme  
2 Cor. 5:17-20; Isaiah 65:17-25**

Our main quadrennial theme: *“Spirituality for These Critical Times”* which we focused on yesterday clearly has very broad and profound implications in the various areas of concern and mission of the church. This is why we need to focus our studies and reflections for the first ecclesiastical year of this new quadrennium (2014-2015) on this main theme alone. We need to get this introduced to the various judicatories, conferences and local churches to enable us to arrive at a theologically coherent, contextually relevant and scripture based understanding of spirituality for these critical times.

What has become clear however from our discussion yesterday was that there will also be some thematic, theological and practical implications of our main theme on the various areas of our life and ministry as a church. This is why the Faith and Order Commission have come out with a suggested list of subthemes for the ensuing ecclesiastical years of the quadrennium. For the EY year 2015-2016 we will be focusing our discussions, studies and reflections on the subtheme, *“Spirituality for a New Humanity.”* For the following EY 2016-2017, the subtheme will be *“Spirituality for a New Creation.”* And for the last EY 2017-2018, the subtheme will be *“Spirituality for Mission.”*

For purposes of providing for a brief introductory discussion on each of these subthemes we shall now attempt to present these sub themes primarily within the biblical-theological framework and also in light of the contemporary contextual challenges that make each of them a very urgent mission concern of the church.

**Sub theme 1: Spirituality for a New Humanity**

Before we can speak of a new humanity we need to consider first the old humanity and the elements that comprise such old humanity. In truth and in fact, we have been living with and among much of the old and broken humanity. This world has been living with much of the values and perspectives arising from that old and broken humanity dominated by greed and its consequent materialist outlook, individualism and its consequent rabid rivalry and competition characterized even by the obsession with power, riches, positions of authority and advantage over others. And then we see the loss of basic human values that are taught even in most religions of the world- caring for one another, loving one another, compassion for the poor, the weak and the marginalized. We see these values being replaced by concerns for what is convenient, what is fast, efficient and smart, what is easily accessible, what is cheap and of course, what will bring in more profits and wealth.

Nobody would want to be bothered anymore with issues that go beyond one’s own individual and immediate concerns. It is so difficult getting support for advocacies that involved getting out into the streets and getting your voice heard on issues that are larger than our own private concerns. It is so difficult now trying to campaign for issues like environmental justice, calling for accountability among

our senators and congressmen in light of the Pork Barrel scandal, or simply to express solidarity with victims of extra judicial killings and other human rights violations.

We are witness to this phenomenon of people simply living for themselves alone and nothing else. This is precisely what the Apostle Paul described as living according to the flesh. It is not implying anything of an erotic nature. It is simply describing the phenomenon of the human being living only for the self. Even with a religious spirit, the self can remain self-ish and self centered.

2 Cor. 5:8-9 tells us of the New Being, the really new person in Christ, who has experienced the power and graciousness of Christ working in his/her life. This is actually what is involved in the experience called conversion, or a radical turning about. This is actually the focus of other year's sub theme on Repentance. I discussed this in the conferences I attended using the story of the prodigal son.

Just like that prodigal son, we realize the depths of our wretchedness, of living only for the self, the pain of being alienated from the father. And then we realize, how in our sinfulness we are actually accepted back, embraced and forgiven by a gracious and loving God in Jesus which leads us to undergo a radical, life changing transformation. There becomes a completely new way of looking at things, all because of a radically transforming experience of knowing Christ for who he really is. We realize he is the only one who is the source of all of what constitutes life, and all that brings meaning and joy to life and the paradigm of how life is to be lived as a forgiven, transformed child of God. We realize the joy and beauty and no longer the wretchedness of being human.

And so, the old values, things that were important before now lose their attraction and priority. We begin to look at ourselves no longer as among those aspiring to succeed in life by our own efforts. We no longer see ourselves as those dreaming to possess all the great things we can dream of in life. We no longer define ourselves by our own selfish standards. We begin to see ourselves in the light of Christ. We begin to realize we have a calling to be part of Christ's mission and God's work to transform His creation. We become part of a new humanity transformed by God. From being concerned with the self, we become more concerned with others, and with our world.

Just like what is said in 2 Cor. 5:17-20 we become Christ's ambassadors for reconciliation. We become concerned in helping people become reconciled to each other and to God. We help create a space where there is always room for dialogue and conversation, where differences are respected, where gender distinctions and preferences are accepted, where bridges of understanding across cultures and religions are built while walls of prejudice and hatred are overcome, just like what Jesus did.

The prophetic vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Isaiah 65:17-25 is very instructive on this point. It simply illustrates the fact that the new heaven and the new earth will be composed mainly of a new humanity, of people who will enjoy the fruits of their labor because no one anymore is going to exploit their labor power or make them slaves. They shall live in houses they have built themselves and not for others. They will enjoy good health that will enable them to live long, long years of productive lives.

Most of all, in the vision about the wolf and the lamb feeding together, and the lion eating straw like the ox (Is. 65:25) there also emerges a radical transformation in the relationships of people of different classes on earth symbolized by predator animals and their prey. The predator will no longer victimize the prey but will live together and feed on the same sources of their sustenance. In human terms, in a transformed world, the victimizer will no longer victimize and the victim will no longer be a victim, but both will live together in harmony and reconciliation, being sustained by the same source of sustaining grace for all.

The new humanity in Christ are people radically transformed and who will work to contribute to the emergence of a new world. Where conflicts arise, they come as the peacemakers and peacebuilders. Where prejudice, exclusion and hatred abound, they come as bridge builders and reconcilers. Where injustice and victimization take place they come as the voice and advocates of the victims calling for justice and restitution. Where mother earth is being destroyed, they come as defenders of the integrity, balance and harmony of the whole creation. This is what a new humanity touched and empowered by the spirit of Christ can do as God's agents of transformation and reconciliation.

### **Sub theme 2: Toward a Spirituality for a New Creation**

We all know the very critical state of God's creation today. We know this not just because we have heard of it or read about it in the newspapers. But we know this because we ourselves have experienced the wrath of nature in these critical times. Many of us have actually become victims of various calamities like those destructive earthquakes and typhoons that have hit our country lately, from Luzon to Visayas and Mindanao, from Ondoy and Pepeng in Luzon to Yolanda in the Visayas to Pablo and Sendong in Mindanao bringing about unprecedented floods, landslides, mudslides and powerful winds and rains that wrecked havoc wherever it struck. Some of us may have suffered great losses in the face of these natural calamities. We may have lost houses and valuable properties and even livelihoods. Most of all, we may have lost dearly beloved family members.

It is as if nature has struck back and is taking its vengeance for all the abuse it has endured for generations in the hands of humans. God's creation, in the words of the Apostle Paul really is now groaning and is in deep labor pains as it awaits the moment when it would be set free from slavery to the corrupt ways of people (Romans 8:21-22).

#### A spiritual-theological crisis

It is clear that our critical times include this ecological-environmental crisis that we are going through these days. As a church, it is our sacred duty to declare that such crisis is a reflection of a far deeper theological, moral and spiritual crisis in the society and the church. Something has gone wrong somewhere in the way we understand our relationship with our environment and our place and our role in it. Something has gone wrong in the way we understand our relationship with our creator. Something has gone wrong in the way we interpret and live the so called life of faith on this earth.

This is brought about to a large degree by a continuing lack of theological equipping on the part of the people leading to a continuing mis apprehension of the actual role and task of human beings as bearers of God's image and its implication to the way we relate to our environment.

With the help of science, we now talk of topics like mitigation of the effects of climate change or disaster preparedness. Certainly science can help us prepare and equip ourselves for such deadly calamities. They can provide us with modern equipment for better, more accurate forecasting and systematic planning and preparation. But science alone cannot prepare our people in acquiring the kind of attitude and spirit, the kind of faith perspective by which we can face and confront the fearsome and destructive forces of these calamities.

Thus we are driven to really reflect on the nature of our relationship with the creator who is Lord over all the forces of nature and our own relationship and kinship with the rest of God's creation.

For sure, our people, especially those who have become victims are not giving up on God even in the face of these calamities. Many of them may even have found renewed strength, renewed hope and have gone on to reaffirm their unrelenting trust and hope in the Lord. Certainly, many of our people have remained genuinely God fearing and more serious about their faith conviction after their experience of calamities.

#### Creation in a process of transformation towards a new creation

Even then, we should not shirk back from our responsibility as a church to teach and proclaim the faith (which is the number 1 constitutional duty of the UCCP GA) and to model the kind of spirituality needed for times like these. In fact, these critical times really require a new understanding of creation theology.

*First* of all, we should not assume that creation is a static and frozen entity. In fact, creation, the whole of nature, remains in a state of dynamic activity towards transformation and renewal which may appear to be cataclysmic upheavals already. But God himself is the one behind this dynamism with the declaration that God is busy doing something new that is now springing forth (Is. 43:19). The Lord himself reiterated this declaration in Revelation 21:5 when he says, "Behold I make all things new!" Indeed, the whole creation is now in the process of being renewed, transformed to make it a totally new one worthy of the glory and majesty of the creator.

*Second*, it is clear that the initiative in the making of a new creation is not in the hands of humans. It is not in our hands. It is solely in the hands of our God the creator. But having been given a distinct place in creation, as creatures created in the image of God, we definitely have a major role to play in the fulfillment of this divine plan of God to make all things new.

*Third*, to understand what really is our role in the total scheme of God's plan for the renewal of creation we have to be clear first of all that we humans have had a major role in the way the present and old creation has developed. Much of the wrongs, much of the problems we see now in our environment can be traced to human failure in understanding our place and role in God's creation. Creation is in travail, it

is groaning mainly because of human abuse and mis use of the resources of creation given to us by the creator.

*Fourth*, this is why we need to seriously reexamine our relationship with God as our creator and how we actually understand the nature of this God as our creator. This will provide the important theological foundation in understanding our role as stewards in God's creation.

*Fifth*, having established a basic theological foundation, we will then be able to articulate the nature of our relationship with the rest of God's creation. Subsequently, we should then be able to reflect more meaningfully on that declaration that we humans are created in the image of the creator God (Gen. 1:26-27).

#### The old, traditional, transcendent image of God and its tragic consequence

Our old understanding of creation theology actually depended on our understanding of God as one powerful being in heaven high above us all, who is so transcendent, so impassive or cannot be moved, so powerful and mighty and who by his mere word has brought all things into existence. From his heavenly throne God wills, watches and monitors everything that happens down here.

With this very high and transcendent image of God as creator, it is only logical for us to develop our understanding of humans based on our understanding of God. Our basic theology has largely shaped and influenced our basic anthropology. We interpreted the creation stories in Genesis 1-2 as stories that elevate the position of humanity above all creatures, being the only creature that was endowed with the image of the creator. And this has served to justify humanity's destructive ways over the rest of creation.

The old creation theology's understanding of the image of God in human coupled with the divine mandate to act as God's steward in this world has served to legitimize the human's dominant and dominating position over all other creatures. As we view God as being so high and lofty above all creatures, so humans think of themselves as similarly positioned, high and above, superior over all the rest of creation. Thus, it becomes very easy for humans to consider themselves as licensed by heaven, divinely empowered and authorized to harness the resources of all the earth for the satisfaction of human needs and desires. As a result this understanding became the primary theological support for the highly exploitative and destructive ways of the human towards the rest of God's creation. Since then there has been so much abuse of the divine mandate and the freedom given by God to humans.

#### God's Gift of Freedom to Humans

The most important gift ever received by the human from God is the gift of freedom and that consciousness of freedom<sup>1</sup>. Of all creatures of God it is only the human who had received this very special gift from the creator. This gift of freedom is itself imbued with so much power and potential. With the freedom given to humans as far as his/her role in this world is concerned, God in effect has

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<sup>1</sup> Eleazar Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

limited what He can do to the rest of creation. God has to set a limit to His own divine powers and prerogatives since God now has to respect the freedom that God has bestowed upon humanity. God has to respect the choices, the decisions, the schemes and machinations created by the human in order to carry out his/her role as a trusted steward to the rest of God's creation.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Effect of Human Freedom on the History of Civilization

To some degree this gift of freedom led to this spirit of inquiry, that spirit of curiosity about the world, the hunger for knowledge and the desire to know and improve the quality of life for humans. This, of course resulted in the continuing advances in our level of civilization, through immense breakthroughs in science, technology and all other related disciplines. Greater knowledge has been achieved. At the same time, greater power over nature has also been acquired. As such humanity has achieved unprecedented levels of productivity and creativity with the rising potential for economic growth, expansion and prosperity never before seen in the history of the world which could have benefited everyone among God's children. But, with greater power and control over most of nature, and with growing incentive for greater wealth and profit, humanity began to forget the essence of the original calling to be God's stewards, created in the image of God, the ones supposed to image God before the rest of creation.

#### The Limits to Freedom Forgotten

Humans forgot the other half of what was given to humanity, the gift of responsibility and accountability. What they remembered was a distorted understanding of the word *Dominion* that was used by God in giving the mandate for humans to take care of the rest of creation in behalf of the creator God (Gen. 1:26, 28). They remembered they are called to exercise dominion over all living things. They then transposed the meaning of the word dominion to domination, thus losing track of the spirit of responsibility and accountability as a steward working in behalf of a creator God.

The sense of responsibility and accountability is what defines the limits of freedom. An exercise of freedom without any sense of responsibility to other fellow creatures and accountability to a higher power leads to pure anarchy and chaos. God says, "You are free to eat or use anything that is in the garden, except for that one tree that I forbid you to touch, the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:16). The human was given both the freedom to live and be sustained in the garden and at the same time the limits to such freedom which involves responsibility for the care of the garden itself, to till it and care for it (Gen. 2:15-17).

Instead, the human being began to flaunt his/her freedom and exercised domination in the quest to achieve security, stability and prosperity on his/her own terms. The quest for human security and preservation of the race translated itself into a continuing quest for more wealth, more energy sources, more food sources, more raw material sources and consequently, more programs and schemes that

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis", *Interpretation* vol. 1 (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) , 30-33.

resulted into massive exploitation and destruction of the resources of the earth and the consequent disturbance of the whole ecological balance on land, sea, air, mountains and forests while at the same time dividing the world into camps of the few rich and powerful and the masses of the poor and powerless.

This is actually what is behind most of the wars and conflicts we have seen in history and in contemporary times. It is the intense rivalry for resources considered as key to economic and political power. For the powerful to retain control and domination of the needed resources while at the same time keeping the powerless at bay in their attempts for change and liberation. This is the obvious motive behind China's attempt to claim large portions of the West Philippine Sea, for its reported vast oil and gas deposits. The same is true in the latest conflict now in Ukraine which has trillions of barrels of oil and gas deposits whose control is now a bone of contention between Russia and the western countries led by the US.

Greed and the drive for profit and greater economic and political power have become the foremost expressions of this quest for security in a rather convoluted and abused understanding of the gift of freedom. With this gift of freedom, the human forgot its limits and his/her responsibility and accountability before the creator God. This may be considered as the primal sin of humanity. These are humans trying to live autonomously, on their own, away from any sense of connection and accountability to a higher power, having lost any sense of awe and any sense of the sacred in the realm of nature. Everything in this world is to be seen as object, object of domination, manipulation, exploitation, development, consumption and possession. Humanity has overextended its freedom and forgot all about the source and giver of such freedom. In looking at ourselves as standing above all creatures we forgot the one who is standing above us all. Now we have to deal with and suffer the consequences.

#### The Need to Change our Image of God

This is why we have to change this vertical view of God and of human relationship with creation. We should think of God not as a being high above us all but as one who is actually with us all. God is not detached but is with His creation, giving beauty, harmony, balance. All other creatures receive their sustenance from the readily available resources supplied and nurtured by God for every other creature's needs (Ps. 145:15-16).

A God who is with us, (Immanuel) has already been shown in concrete form in and through Jesus. In fact, even before Jesus, God has already revealed Godself as a presence, as Spirit that can be described in various metaphors, as a powerful wind or breath of God hovering over the surface of the deep (Gen. 1:2), giving life, energy to all creatures, or like a mother giving protective comfort to her distressed son (Is. 66:13), or like a parent taking into her arms her young child (Hos. 11:1-4), or like the dew for Israel enabling her to blossom like the lily (Hos. 14:6). Finally, in the proclamation of the coming of the New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation 21:3, there it is said that *"God's dwelling is now with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be His people and God Himself will always be with them."*

### Toward a Spirituality of Kinship with the Rest of God's Creation

With this view of God, as a caring, protecting, nurturing presence right in creation while being with people as his dwelling place, we should then look at ourselves as radiating this kind of presence before all creatures, providing for that caring, protecting, nurturing presence of humans among all creatures of God. We can, in the spirit of humility, even learn from the indigenous peoples of our land, in the way they relate to their environment, with a kind of spiritual attachment, with respect and reverence for all, for both animals, plants, mountains, bodies of water and the like.

Perhaps, this is the kind and mode of spirituality that we desperately need in this critical times for our environment and the rest of God's creation- a Spirituality of Kinship . We need to embrace and be embraced by that spirit that enables us to experience unity and kinship with the rest of God's creation which is now being made new, adopting a mode of living at peace and in harmony with all creatures, viewing each one as a fellow valued creature of one creator God whose living, caring and protecting presence can readily be experienced by those who have become spiritually attuned and sensitive to the glory, beauty and mystery of such divine manifestations in each part of God's creation.

### **Sub theme 3: Spirituality for Mission**

Mission is the very *raison for being* of the church. "The church of Jesus Christ does not have mission, in its very life it is mission."<sup>3</sup> The age of "missions" (plural), the term used by missionaries of old and which was attached to colonial conquests of small nations by the powerful Christians nations in the earlier centuries and imbued mostly with expansionist ideals is ended.<sup>4</sup> But the age of "mission" (singular) has begun.<sup>5</sup> For the church has no mission other than the mission of God (Missio Dei).<sup>6</sup> Since there is only one God there can only be one mission.<sup>7</sup> God himself is a missionary God working through the church.<sup>8</sup> The task of the church is to carry out the mission of God in and through Jesus. The church's mission and ministry is simply the extension and continuation of the mission and ministry of Christ Jesus. Thus, if we talk of spirituality for mission we can only talk of the spirituality of Jesus and the mission of Jesus as the source of our understanding and exposition of this sub theme.

The nature of this mission of Jesus and that of his spirituality is already clearly identified in that defining text of Luke 4:18-19. It is in fact a mission towards liberation and transformation, a liberation or rescue from certain objective conditions in life that diminishes the meaning of being human, a rescue from captivity or slavery, from blindness that keeps people from seeing and perceiving what is truth, from

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<sup>3</sup> Elton Trueblood, *The Validity of the Christian Mission*, chap. 5, "The Theology of Mission", (1972), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, (Penguin Books, 1964), cited in *Missiology: Missio Dei (God's Mission) A Statement on Mission by the Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church Disciples of Christ*, globalministries.org

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-390.



oppression to full freedom. It is therefore a mission intended for a radical transformation of the objective conditions of people who have been consigned to the most dehumanizing conditions in life.

The scope of this mission of Jesus involves those who had been trapped in the margins and living without any clear hope for the future. This refers to those who have become slaves due to indebtedness. For debt had been a principal cause of slavery, loss of properties and consequent poverty even in Old Testament times. This refers also to those who had become victims of manipulation of the truth by those who wield the levers of power. They just have to live as prisoners within a closed circle of a highly oppressive reality from which there would be no immediate escape even for their descendants. Once a debt slave, always a debt slave, even for one's children and grandchildren.

Jesus' declaration in this text of Luke 4 is an announcement of a radical breakthrough in the conditions of these people in the margins, especially as he concludes this declaration based on a quote from the text of Is. 61 with a reference to the text of Lev. 25, in the declaration of the Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor. This is when release from slavery, indebtedness and return to one's ancestral land and giving rest to the land become the central elements in the landscape of transformation that is declared here.

Change in one's economic and political status and change in the environmental situation is no less revolutionary. For this involves the announcement of a new reality, a new age, a new mode of relationships which would naturally clash with the present reality dominated by the slave owners, oppressive landlords, opportunistic loan sharks and powerful religious and government leaders who keep the peace of the status quo. They wanted to keep the slaves for loans to be paid and not cancelled, to keep the lands they have foreclosed and grabbed from the poor and would not want any rest or respite in the planting and harvesting of the land.

Jesus' mission is really a mission announcing the new reality of God's reign as opposed to the old reality dominated by the powers that be in his time. It is precisely what Jesus had been announcing in other occasions (cf. Matt. 11:4-6). This is what makes it good news for the poor but bad news for these powers that be.

For all its revolutionary implications and content, this mission of Jesus is a mission imbued with the very spirit of God. Take note. Jesus went forth proclaiming this good news for the poor after being anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. To be empowered by the Spirit of the Lord is to be empowered to proclaim and witness to this good news that brings hope for the poor and the suffering of this world. The mission of Jesus is a mission imbued with much spirituality. It is a spirituality of engagement for the mission of transformation. It is a spirituality that calls for deep engagement with the lives of people crying and hoping for change while remaining rooted and engaged with the word and will of God for justice and righteousness.

It is this kind of spirituality for mission which the church has to be imbued with. It has to receive this spirit right from Jesus. It is the spirit that connects us to the presence of a just and righteous God while

empowering us to stand in solidarity with the poor and those who suffer under the weight of much oppression and injustice in these times. As the church receives this spirit with the accompanying mode of spirituality, only then can we carry out the mission for which It has been called out to live, to simply follow and continue the mission that Jesus had started, without any reason to boast or take pride in, but simply in all humility and faithfulness to the end.