Think Globally, Act Locally: A General Evaluation on the Performance of Ecumenism and Inter-Faith Dialogue in the Local Catholic Churches of the Philippines

Abstract:

The popular dictum—“Think globally and act locally”\(^1\)— can be applied not just in management but also in the life and mission of the Catholic Church. For example, this can be used as an important tool for evaluating the implementation of ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue in the local Catholic Churches in the Philippines. Using this framework, this paper will show how local churches’ very parochial perspective hinders the development of not just ecumenism and interfaith dialogue but also of other global standpoint of the church in the Philippines.

A reversed globalization is happening which hinders inter-faith dialogue and other global thinking of the church.

Introduction:

Explain the dictum

It is the base communities who are more localizing than the hierarchy in the pretext of preserving the orthodoxy

Think Globally:

The *magisterium* of the Catholic Church provides the global thinking—over-all guidance and direction in the life and mission—to the local churches worldwide. From the global thinking, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue has been declared as an integral dimension of evangelization and mission of the Church. This is evident in various documents from Vatican II,

\(^1\) "The original phrase "Think Global, Act Local" has been attributed to Scots town planner and social activist Patrick Geddes. Although the exact phrase does not appear in Geddes’ 1915 book "Cities in Evolution," the idea (as applied to city planning) is clearly evident: " 'Local character' is thus no mere accidental old-world quaintness, as its mimics think and say. It is attained only in course of adequate grasp and treatment of the whole environment, and in active sympathy with the essential and characteristic life of the place concerned." Think Globally, Act Locally, Wikipedia, accessed online January 6, 2010 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think_Globally,_Act_Locally
to Pope Paul VI to Pope John Paul II to Pope Benedict XVI, from the synod of Bishops, from the pontifical commissions, from the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference. This paper can only briefly cite some of the most important documents.

In the Vatican II, two conciliar documents—*Nostra Aetate* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*—tackled Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue. *Unitatis Redintegratio* says that “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.”

This is because the division of Christians “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”

The basis for ecumenism and interfaith dialogue is the common origin and destination of all humanity:

“One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.”

Seen in the eschatological destination of the Kingdom of God for all humanity, ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue is an integral dimension of being church today. “… the Church is not a static but a dynamic reality, that she is the People of God on pilgrimage between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. The Council integrated the ecumenical movement into this eschatological dynamic.” Understood in this way, ecumenism is the "way of the Church". It is

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2 *Unitatis Redintegratio, Vatican II Decree On Ecumenism*, n. 1.
3 Ibid.
6 *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 7. *Ut Unum Sint*, an encyclical by Pope John Paul II released on May 25, 1995, are Latin words for ‘may they be one’ from the prayer of Jesus in John’s Gospel (John 17: 21). This document reiterated and deepened the call for unity of Christian churches declared by Vatican II’s *Unitatis Redintegratio*. 
neither an addition nor some sort of appendix, but an integral, organic part of the life and pastoral activity of the Church.\textsuperscript{7}

In this light, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue can only happen through constant conversion:

\begin{quote}
“The Council was thus able say that spiritual ecumenism is the heart of ecumenism. Spiritual ecumenism means interior conversion, spiritual renewal, the personal sanctification of life, charity, self-denial, humility, patience, but also renewal and reform of the Church. Above all, prayer is the heart of the ecumenical movement (cf. Unitatis Redintegratio, nn. 5-8); Ut Unum Sint, nn. 15 ff., 2127).”\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

“A true metanoia regarding the importance of dialogue in the mission of the Church is one of the first goals to be attained if interreligious dialogue may ever become a reality. This affects both pastors and ordinary faithful. Measures should be taken to favor this change of heart and mind at the earliest possible time: the Church in Asia should move now.”\textsuperscript{9}

Thus, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue belong to the urgent calls of the times. The Decree on Ecumenism shows us the way in the 21st century. It is the Lord's will that we follow this path, with prudence but also with courage, patience and above all, with steadfast hope.\textsuperscript{10} On several occasions Pope John Paul II has said that the ecumenical venture is irrevocable (cf. Ut Unum Sint, n. 3, et al.), and that ecumenism is "one of the pastoral priorities" of his Pontificate (ibid., n. 99).\textsuperscript{11} Pope Benedict XVI himself has said that the Church has not yet fully discovered all the profound implications of Nostra Aetate.\textsuperscript{12}

These declarations from the Council brought a profound change and a more positive attitude of the Catholic Church to other religions

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\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., n. 20.
\textsuperscript{8} Cardinal Walter Kasper, ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} BIRA IV/1: Report on the Assembly of the First Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue,” n. 19.
\textsuperscript{10} Cardinal Walter Kasper, ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”

"The Church's mission is to foster "the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ' (Rv 11: 15), at whose service she is placed. Part of her role consists in recognizing that the inchoate reality of this kingdom can be found also beyond the confines of the Church, for example, in the hearts of the followers of other religious traditions, insofar as they live evangelical values and are open to the action of the Spirit."

“Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.”

Every religion, in fact, presents itself as a search for salvation and offers ways to attain it.

A significant concern from this global thinking on ecumenism and interfaith dialogue was the concern that dialogue will lessen the urgency for Christian mission and proclamation. Many documents reiterated the mutuality of dialogue and proclamation:

“In years past, some considered dialogue with the followers of other religions to be opposed to proclamation, a primary duty of the Church's mission. In fact, interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the Church's evangelizing mission (cf. CCC, n. 856). As I have often stressed, it is fundamental for the Church, is an expression of her saving mission and is a dialogue of salvation (cf. Insegnamenti VII/1 [1984], pp. 595-599). Thus, interreligious dialogue does not mean abandoning proclamation, but answering a divine call so that exchange and sharing may lead to a mutual witness of one's own religious viewpoint, deeper knowledge of one another's convictions and agreement on certain fundamental values.”

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13 Nostra Aetate, Ibid., n. 2.
14 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Dialogue and Proclamation, n. 35
15 (RM 56/1D 179)
16 See CCC, n. 843
17 Ibid.
Yet she proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, men find the fullness of their religious life” (Nostra aetate, n. 2).18

Translating interreligious dialogue into practice can take cue from the four forms of dialogue framed by Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1984.19

a) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.

d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

This global thinking is vibrant not just in documents but also in action. John Paul II during his papacy organized numerous interreligious encounters. Foremost among them is the Interreligious World Day of Prayer for Peace which took place in Assisi, Italy in 1986. As Edmund Chia said: “John Paul II is one pope who has done much more than all previous popes when it comes to interreligious dialogue. He has been instrumental for building bridges between

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the various and varied religious traditions. Practically all of his official visits include an
interreligious event.” Pope Benedict XVI has continued this legacy of John Paul II.

From the global thinking, therefore, the question of whether or not the church should
engage in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue is no longer academic but an essential dimension of
church’s self-understanding today.

Act Locally:

The local churches are responsible in translating into concrete action the global thinking
of the church. They are to be truly local but a manifestation of the universal church. This
involves inculturation and contextualization of the global perspective of the church in the
concrete economic, political, social and cultural milieu of the people.

“It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is
proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and
to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the
Social Teaching of the Church... It is up to these Christian communities – with the help of
the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue
with other Christian brethren and all men of good will – to discern the options and
commitments which need to be taken.”

What is the concrete situation of the Philippines in terms of interreligious dialogue?

According to the 2000 Philippine Census, 92.6% of its population of 80 million is Christian.
Christian groups in the population include Catholics (81.0%), Protestants (7.3%), Iglesia ni
Kristos (2.3%) and Aglipayans (2.0%). The next largest group is Muslims (5.1%). Other
groups reported by the Census include tribal religions (0.2%) and Buddhists (0.1%).

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20 Edmund Chia, Of Fork And Spoon Or Fingers And Hopsticks: Interreligious Dialogue In Ecclesia In Asia, accessed online December 28, 2010 at http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr00/chia.htm
21 Pope Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens Apostolic Letter On The Occasion Of The 80th Anniversary Of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical Rerum Novarum, May 14, 1971, 4
22 An indigenous Christian sect in the Philippines founded by Felix Manalo in 1914.
23 An indigenous Christian sect in the Philippines, founded by Isabela de los Reyes in 1902 with Gregorio Aglipay as its first head.
The main body created by the Catholic Church in the Philippines to take the lead in interreligious dialogue is the Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue (ECID). In 1991, the ECID had a survey taken on interreligious dialogue in the Philippines. This survey was to gather the insights and perceptions of the Catholics in the Philippines on interreligious dialogue.

In general, the results of the survey, showed that ecumenism and interfaith dialogue hasn’t caught enough fire in the local church. 95% of the respondents felt it was necessary for Catholics to be involved in interreligious dialogue, however, only about 37% of Catholics in general was open to dialogue with the other 63% only a little open to it or closed to it. The majority believed that dialogue with Muslims should be the first priority because they were nearer and there was a need to heal the wounds of the past and build peace. Muslims were viewed as a closed community and some felt that they would be skeptical to any Christian initiatives for dialogue. The results showed a significant interest in dialogue among the respondents while there was a need for Catholics and others who were not open to it.

Another survey in 1996 done by the ECID through its Newsletter ECID and letters mailed to bishops, major superiors, institutions, schools and other groups, indicated that interreligious dialogue was something new and it was not yet perceived as an integral part of the mission of the church. This report described interreligious dialogue as the new challenge of the

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
third millennium. Indeed, the Philippine Bishops in their letter, “Missions and the Church of the Philippines,” referred to interreligious dialogue as one of the “new things” of mission.

Interreligious dialogue is strongest in the southern island of Mindanao due to the age old conflict between Muslims and Christians. A significant venue for inter-faith dialogue in Mindanao is the Bishop-Ulama Forum. Bishop Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J., chairman of the ECID describes the beginnings and accomplishments of said forum from 1996 to 2002:

“The Bishops-Ulama Forum, formed in November 1996, brings together religious leaders of Muslim and Christian communities from all over Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. It includes members of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, members of the Ulama League of the Philippines and bishops of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.” From its inception, the B.U.F. has focused on the spiritual bases for peace from both Muslim and Christian religious traditions, grounded in the belief in one God, a common origin and a common destiny for all. Over the past five-and-a-half years, the B.U.F. has held 19 dialogue meetings on a quarterly basis in various cities in Mindanao. These intercultural and interreligious dialogues have been carried out in an atmosphere of openness, mutual respect and growing familiarity among This ongoing experience affirms that instead of being sources of conflict, authentic religious traditions can be harnessed as solid foundations for peace.”

A notable example of dialogue of life with the Muslims was shown by the late Bishop Bienvenido Tudtud. He did special studies in Islam and then asked Paul VI to relieve him of his Bishopric and let him live among the Muslims in an apostolate of presence. James Reuter describes Tudtud’s endearing example:

“… Bishop Tudtud settled down in the little town of Marawi. When he said Mass, he was sitting on the floor. His vestments, and the vessels of sacrifice, made him look exactly like a Muslim Imam. He did not assume any position of authority. He was just a friend. And the Muslims loved him… That was Bishop Tudtud’s approach. Not to

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29 Ibid., 15.
32 Ibid
33 Ibid
34 Ibid.
convert. Not to argue about religion. Just to live together. He hoped that the Muslims would see how the Christians loved each other, and be drawn closer to God. On the radio he sang songs and told stories. He was the most popular broadcaster in Mindanao, among both Muslims and Christians.”

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How about the rest of the country? Probably because the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, it would be fair to say that the need for interreligious dialogue is not strongly felt. Thus, in general, aside from Mindanao, local churches in the country do not have a program for ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. There have been positive efforts in ecumenism, however, in terms of action for justice and peace, ecology, poverty, moral integrity, etc., by certain individuals and groups but not the local church as a whole.

Another important dimension of the Philippine context which affects the interreligious dialogue is the cultural-religious phenomenon of sarado catolico (literally – close Catholics) where a strong social pressure is imposed upon all to remain a Catholic forever and to be wary of other religions. If someone converts to another religion, he or she is ostracized by the family or community. One is a good Catholic as long as he/she is sarado catolico. Never mind if he/she doesn’t attend church services or he/she got plenty of vices. Thus, many times they are not only close to other denominations but even to meaningful personal transformation.

This narrow understanding of Catholicity is reinforced by a strong clericalization of Philippine church. A sarado catolico never undermines the authority of the clergy and church hierarchy in order to preserve the unity of the church. This is one of the reasons why the Catholic tradition was preserved for the past 500 years amongst the Filipino majority. However in recent years, aggressive proselytization by fundamentalist sects in the rural and urban poor areas has been slowly eating into the Catholic membership. This resulted in a strong animosity and competition among the Christian churches which continue up to this day.

36 Ibid.
This sarado catolico syndrome has been recognized as a major concern by the Philippine church in the past: “Many are baptized but few are evangelized.”37 In fact, PCP II called for integral evangelization as the way to build the Church of the Poor.38

But sadly in most local churches, not sufficient evangelization has been done. There are very few catechists yet many are in need of catechism. Evangelization has been left to the lay especially members of lay organizations, movements, associations and societies.

The clergy are more focused on the ad intra—maintenance and administration of the church structures, sacramental and liturgical services. Many parishes are building big churches despite many of their parishioners are poor and don’t even have a descent place to live in. Most resources of the local church are allotted to church construction and maintenance but seldom to evangelization. Because there is endless constructions, fund raising has become the continuous activity in the local churches.

With heavy focus on the ad intra, local churches are far from being missional. The global perspective of—“as the entire Church is by its nature missionary, so every local Church will be and must be of itself missionary”—is extremely lacking. Missionary consciousness and activity is still seen as the activity of missionaries sent to foreign and remote mission territories.

This lack of global perspective is also manifested in the understanding of the role of hierarchy. The parish priest instead of considering himself as the steward, many times acts like the owner of the parish as he brings his own agenda, styles, priorities, needs, with slightest awareness that the parish is not just part of the whole Catholic worldwide church. Because every parish priest does his own thing there is lack of continuity in the programs of the parish. The

37 Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), 1991, n. 5.
38 Ibid.
Bishops’ role on the other hand is widely perceived as to preserve the orthodoxy. However, orthodoxy in this sense is more about \textit{ad intra} seldom about \textit{ad extra}.

Because of this parochial perspective, global perspective is sorely missing in the local churches, not just interfaith dialogue but the missionary and evangelizing dimension.

\textit{“Think globally, act locally!”}

\textit{Think globally, act locally!}—implies a universal church that is able to give guidance and direction to local churches sans ethnocentrism and a local church which is dynamically able to translate the universal thinking into its concrete milieu sans relativism.

The global thinking provides some progressive thinking on interreligious dialogue. However, there have been apprehensions regarding Vatican’s perceived demand for orthodoxy which discourages indigenization of the church in the diverse culture and context, despite Vatican II’s principle of collegiality.\textsuperscript{40} While it is Vatican’s prerogative to provide global perspective, she must also be conscious about the implicit cultural perspective from which she makes the proclamations; Vatican is also a local church (local church of Rome) which often represents the Western perspective.

On the other hand, there is a lack of dynamism among local churches. For example in liturgy, sacraments and evangelization, local churches are content with adaptation of western categories instead of genuine inculturation. Dogmatic and legal statements, decrees, policies and guidelines easily gets attention while major theological themes and spirituality, e.g., dialogue, inculturation, mission hardly gets attention.

Meanwhile vast potentials for interreligious dialogue in the local churches remain untapped, e.g., consciousness of pluralism and multi-cultural diversity in the community, how to confront the close Catholic phenomenon, ecumenical efforts for justice and peace, etc. The

\textsuperscript{40} See Lumen Gentium, n. 27.
bottom line is interreligious dialogue is not just another activity but a way of life—spiritual ecumenism which calls for a more eschatological, humble and dynamic church.

**Conclusion:**

To be Catholic Church in this age of globalization is be *glocal*[^41]—local and universal at the same time; local in practice, global in thinking. Unless the local church transcends its parochial perspective, it will not be at par with the global thinking of the church. Moreover, for interreligious dialogue to prosper, the global and local church must do their distinctive role while cultivating an interdependent and dynamic relationship.

**Bibliography:**


[^41]: Combination of two words: global and local.
Octogesima Adveniens, Apostolic Letter On The Occasion Of The 80th Anniversary Of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical


Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), Manila, 1991


Unitatis Redintegratio, Vatican II Decree On Ecumenism, n. 1.