

# A SEARCH FOR BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SPIRITUALITY

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## Introduction

From the time of pope Paul VI a generally accepted ecclesial principle is that the future of the Church depends to a large extent on the formation of Basic Christian Communities.<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II has confirmed it through his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* and other exhortations.<sup>2</sup> As the Church in the third Millennium 'lies on the periphery, on the border-zones'<sup>3</sup> the formation of the BCCs has its own relevance. The FABC, CBCI and CCBI have also accepted this fact. Although we have more than enough teachings on the importance of the BCCs, when one looks at the concrete situations in the local Churches, we notice that even those who were enthusiastic in the beginning of the formation of the BCCs find it hard to live in the spirit of the BCCs. This article is intended to highlight a few aspects of the core of the BCCs, namely their spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> The first official Church document on the BCCs is Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) 58.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II in his *Christifideles Laici* (1988) n. 26 and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) 51, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) 25, has confirmed the necessity of forming BCCs.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Wilfred, "A Vision for the New Century: Role of Religions and Approaches to Christian Mission" in Thomas Malipurath and L. Stanslaus, ed., *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2001, 95.

## 1. Dynamics of Spirituality

Spirituality is a term that has not yet been defined, analysed or categorized to anyone's satisfaction. However, as Ursula King notes, it has become a fashionable word used in widely different contexts today, but it is often unclear what is meant by this term. Etymologically, the word 'spirituality' derives from the Latin word *spiritualitas*. It is an abstract word related to *spiritus* and *spiritualis* which were used to translate Paul's *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*. Historically speaking, the word began to be used in the Christian circle from the fifth century in the writings of Pseudo-Jerome.<sup>5</sup> He used the word in the Pauline sense. For Paul the Spirit is an energizer, a spirit of power (1 Cor 2,4; Rom 15:13) and the source of Christian love, hope and faith.<sup>6</sup> From the fifth century onwards we find that the term has been in use with different nuances, although it is with Vatican II that spirituality became a subject not only of the selected few but also of the ordinary people.<sup>8</sup> A.M. Besnard wrote in 1965, "Everything leads us to think that new

<sup>4</sup> Ursula King, "Spirituality in a Post-modern Age," in Ursula King, ed., *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*, London: Casell, 1998 94-112. See also Marie McCarthy, "Spirituality in a Post Modern Era" in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, ed., *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 192-206.

<sup>5</sup> A. Solognac, "Spiritualité", in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol. XIV, Paris: Beauchesne, 1990, col. 1142-1145. For a further study on historical development of the term see K. Waaijman, "Toward a phenomenological definition of Spirituality" *Studies in Spirituality*, 3 (1993) 4-57; W. Principie, "Toward Defining Spirituality" in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12/2(1983)130; Selvister Ponnunmuthan, *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India*, Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universite Gregoriana, 1996, 47-59; John Ponnore, *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest: In the Light of the North Indian Missionary Reality*, Raipur: Pastoral Centre, 1998, 7-20,

<sup>6</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Pauline Theology" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992, n. 64,

<sup>7</sup> John Ponnore, *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest*, 7-20,

<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Well: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, London: SCM Press 1987, 13-14. The frequent use of the term "spirituality" comes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the theological literature. In English the word itself became very common after 1950 especially with the translation of the classical French works of Pierre Pourrat's four volume *La Spiritualité Catholique* (1918-1928) and other French works. It is enough to compare the two major religious reference works published at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* (1912-1915) and *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (1912-1915) which contain no article on spirituality. With the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, published in the 70's containing eight articles which include the word spirituality in their titles and thirteen references to it in its index, one understands the evolution and consequent acceptance of the term into theological circles. See Selvister Ponnunmuthan, *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 47-49.

forms of spirituality are taking shape in contemporary Catholicism" and again he said that "the element of rediscovery is all the more evident because new members of the faithful are showing for the first time a desire for an authentic spirituality."<sup>9</sup> A shift in the understanding of spirituality is vivid in the various views held by theologians.

## 1.1 Descriptions of Spirituality

It is true that spirituality cannot be defined according to one's satisfaction. However, the various descriptions on spirituality and spiritual theology give many insights to understand the dynamic nature of the spirituality of BCCs. Hence we give a few of them which in turn will help us to understand the spirituality of BCCs. According to C.A. Bernard, spirituality is a theological discipline which founded on the principles of revelation, studies Christian spiritual experience, describes its development and progress and explains its structures and laws.<sup>10</sup> L. Richard says that spirituality is the radical drive of the person toward self-transcending authenticity in knowing, naming and loving God. He argues that knowing, naming and loving are not only the basic structures of spirituality but also of theology. For it is the ongoing task of the theologian to know, name and love the mystery in which, or better, on whom he or she is grounded.<sup>11</sup> According to K.Waaijman, spirituality is the ongoing transformation which occurs in involved relationality with the Unconditional.<sup>12</sup> B. Secondin holds the view that spirituality is communitarian based on the renewed ecclesiological principle of "communion".<sup>13</sup> According to S.M. Schneiders spirituality is that particular actualisation of the capacity for self-transcendence that is constituted by the substantial

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<sup>9</sup> A. M. Besnard, "Tendencies of Contemporary Spirituality," *Concilium* 9/1 (1965)14-24.

<sup>10</sup> C.A. Bernard, *Teologia Spirituale*, Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 1989, 70.

<sup>11</sup> L.Richard, "Theology in Need of Spirituality," *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 2(1992) 161-172.

<sup>12</sup> see K. Waaijman, "Toward a Phenomenological Definition of Spirituality," 4-57.

<sup>13</sup> B. Secondin, "Alla Prova nella Nuova Cultura" in T.Goffi - B.Secondin, ed., *Corso di Spiritualità*, Brescia Querinimno, 1989, 680-752.

gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-giving relationship with God in Christ within the believing *community*. Thus, Christian spirituality is a Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesial religious experience.<sup>14</sup>

H. Alphonso sees spirituality as the way in which a person (or a group of persons) animated by the living presence and action of the spirit of Christ acts and reacts habitually in accordance with his/her (or their) characteristic Christian gifts.<sup>15</sup> E. R. Martinez gives a Trinitarian definition to Christian spirituality. According to him it is the mature and maturing relation to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> For S. Galilea spirituality means to live the spirit according to the Gospel and to follow Jesus Christ with the help of the Church - whatever epoch, whatever the society, whatever the culture, whatever the personal circumstances.<sup>17</sup> From a liberation theological perspective Gustavo Gutierrez understands spirituality as the living water that springs up in the very depths of the experience of faith.<sup>18</sup>

The above given descriptions show the dynamic nature of spirituality. The words like "a progressive development", "a radical drive", "ongoing transformation", "communitarian based on the renewed ecclesiology centered on *communion*", "living presence and action of the Spirit", "mature and maturing relationship", "application of the Gospel to Christian life", "living water" are very significant. Here one may note that the *fuga mundi*<sup>19</sup> attitude of the religious experience is not seen in any descriptions although some of them have not emphasised explicitly

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<sup>14</sup> S. M. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners," *Horizons* 13 (1986), 253-274.

<sup>15</sup> H. Alphonso, *Placed with Christ the Son*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1993, 151-162.

<sup>16</sup> E. R. Martinez, *La Vita Cristiana e la Spiritualità Secondo San Paolo*, Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1992, 2.

<sup>17</sup> S. Galielea, "The Spirituality of Liberation," *The Way*, 25 (1985) 186-194

<sup>18</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Well*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Fuga Mundi* is a spirituality which posits both affective and actual flight from the world as the prerequisite for living a life of Christian perfection. See N.C. Ring, "Fuga Mundi" in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G.S. Wakefield, London: SCM Press, 1983, 167-168.

the communitarian aspect. A common thread we pull from the above mentioned definitions is that Christian spirituality is theological and related to *human persons* who are living in a particular context. Since it is related to human persons it is dynamic or creative and communitarian. From the Indian perspective too we can say that there is no spirituality without a communitarian dimension.<sup>20</sup> In order to have a better comprehension of the spirituality of BCCs the word "communitarian" has to be understood in terms of the Bible. For that a small analysis of the word "covenant" in the OT and "communion" in the NT is necessary.

## 1. 2 Covenant and Communion: The Source of Vertical & Horizontal Dimensions of Spirituality

God's intervention in the history of humankind and the human response to God's intervention is well expressed by the term "communion" (*Koinonia*).<sup>21</sup> The word *koinonia* is not very much used in LXX (only three times) although the use of the term expressing a close relationship between God and man is not unknown to the OT. To express the idea of communion, the OT uses the word covenant.

### 1.2.1 Covenant

A covenant (*berit*) is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make a promise under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance. In the Sinai Covenant, God's divine intervention is very important. It is God who elects the people of Israel. The initiative comes from God. It was gratuitous on the part of God (Deut 7:7-8). He liberates them from bondage (Ex19:5). And He makes a covenant (Ex 19:3-25). Before the ratification He imposes some stipulations which Israel

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<sup>20</sup> Sebastian Painadath, "Towards an Indian Christian Spirituality in the Context of Religious Pluarlism" in *Towards An Indian Christian Spirituality in a Pluralistic Context*, ed. Dominic Veliath, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1993, 3-14. See also Dominic George, "Towards a Secular Spirituality for Today" in the same book from 18-36

<sup>21</sup> F. Hauck, "Koinos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., G.Kittel and G. Freidrich, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1900,789ff.

has to observe. By observing the stipulations they are assured of divine blessing (Ex19:5-6). Israel agreed to carry out what God had said (Ex 24:3). As a sign of ratification of the covenant blood was sprinkled (Ex 24:6-7).<sup>22</sup>

The effect of the covenant was that Israel became God's own people. They realised that their God is friendly. They became a community. This community, formed out of God's choice, has a great responsibility to others. The responsibility to others is also emphasised in the commandments. It is to be noted that seven commandments, out of ten, are directly related to the community (Ex 20:12-17). The social milieu in which the covenant was given is also important. God intervened in the life of a suffering people. And He liberated them and made a covenant with them. The theological implication of the covenant is that it was a preparation and figure of the new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ, and of the fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God made flesh.<sup>23</sup> The Church, as the new people of Israel, participating in the covenant which was ratified in Christ, is expected to live in holiness and in communion (LG, 9).

### 1.2.2 Communion

The word communion comes from the Greek word "koinonia". It is an abstract term, coming from *koinos* and *koinoneo* denoting participation and fellowship. In the secular sense it is used especially of close life participation. The word, in the ancient Greek, gives an idea of the unbroken relationship of fellowship between God and humankind. Communion (*koinonia*) in the NT is the dynamic expression of Christian life. *Koinonia* does not originate in the human person but in God. In Christ the

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<sup>22</sup> "Blood, of course, was for the Hebrews the seat and sign of life and as such was reserved to God. Here Yahweh and people share in the same sort of blood and hence the same life: they are members of one family". D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, Roma: Biblical Institute Press, 1981, 255.

<sup>23</sup> A new covenant becomes necessary because Israel was not faithful to the old covenant. They broke the covenant (Jer 31:32). But God was faithful in His promises. He promises a new covenant (Jer 31:33). This would be a permanent covenant. This covenant would bring a change of hearts and the gift of the divine spirit (Ezek 36:26ff).

communion becomes a reality, because he is himself God and man. Incarnation is the first moment of God's *koinonia* with humankind. Christ has created a new openness among humankind introducing the concept of *koinonia* as an open reality.<sup>24</sup> And the primitive Christians lived in that *koinonia* (Acts 2:42).

Paul uses *koinonia* for the religious fellowship (participation). Paul, in his exposition on *koinonia* speaks more of *koinonia* with the person Christ. The Christians are called to fellowship with the Son (1 Cor 1:9). The participation in the person of Christ leads one to participate in the Gospel (1 Cor 9:23). Paul uses *koinonia* also for the fellowship which arises in the Lord's supper. According to him those who partake in the Lord's supper are Christ's companions (1 Cor 10:16-22). Sharing in the fellowship of Jesus Christ means to participate in the life of Christ (Rom 6:8; 2 Cor 7:3), including suffering which will lead to glory (Phil 3:10-12).<sup>25</sup> *Koinonia* with Christ according to Paul, necessarily leads to *koinonia* with Christians. The *koinonia* in Christ prompts one to help the other in spiritual or material needs (Rom 15:27).

The attitude of *koinonia*, according to Paul, should be the guiding principle of Christian life. His analogy of body (1 Cor 12:12-30) is an example to show how a Christian community could live together. A Christian community might transcend all local barriers to live in one Spirit so as to form one body.

## 2. Spirituality of BCCs

We have seen that *koinonia* is the essential characteristic of Christian life. In fact the ecclesiology of communion is a central and fundamental concept in the Conciliar documents too (LG 2, 4, 8, 13-15, 18, 21, 24-25; DV 10; GS 32; UR 2-4, 14-15, 17-19, 22). In *Christifideles Laici* we read: "The ecclesiology of communion is a

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<sup>24</sup> G. Panikulam, *Koinonia in the New Testament: A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life*, Roma: Biblical Institute Press, 1979, 140-141.

<sup>25</sup> Paul uses mainly four prepositions: *dia* (through), *eis* (into) *syn* (with) and *en*(in) with *Christ* to show the intimate relation with Jesus. J. Fitzmyer, *Paul and His Theology*, 88-99.

central and fundamental concept in the Conciliar documents. *Koinonia* – communion finding its source in Sacred Scripture, was a concept held in great honour in the early Church and in the Oriental Churches, and this teaching endures to the present day.”<sup>26</sup> Communion is manifested when two or three people are gathered in Christ’s name. It is manifested when the Word of God is proclaimed, listened to and lived in a community. It is manifested when one shares the joys and sufferings of one’s neighbours. And this kind of communion takes place better in small groups and in the full sense in Basic Christian Communities.<sup>27</sup>

Larger groups become too vast to experience communion. Family, though the basic unit of the Church and society, does not adopt a public value system and can remain internally oriented. In the present day context of nuclear families it is all the more difficult to express a value system. The membership in the family is by birth, while in an ecclesial community it is a matter of Christian commitment which comprises a mission.

The people of a parish scattered in different sections of the parish cannot be formed into a communion through a liturgical service alone. The liturgy ought to be, rather, an expression of their

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<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Small groups have been recognised as the effective way of building Christian communities in the world irrespective of countries or continents. The small groups such as *Catholic Action*, *Focolare Movement*, *Movement of Communion and Liberation*, *I Cursillos de Cristianidad*, *Il Movimento Luce-Vitae*, *Le Comunità di Vita Cristiana*, *I Terz’Ordini Secolari e le Confraternite* which originate before Vatican II, have been witnessing Christ and silently building Christian communities in Europe. Similar movements and groups can be named in the case of Asia as well as America. Movements that have radical effects in the life of the Church are seen especially in Latin America and India. See B. Secondin, *Segni di Profezia nella Chiesa: comunità gruppi movimenti*, Milano: Etizioni O.R., 1987, 164-197, 325-3331; see also Selvester Ponnunmuthan, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 25-27; A Favale, ed., *Movimenti ecclesiali contemporanei: Dimensioni storiche, teologico-spirituali ed apostoliche*, Roma: Pontificia Studiorum Universitas A.S. Thoma AQ in Urbe, 1982; W.C. Gubuan, *The Basic Christian Communities in the Church in the Philippines: A Historico-Theological Reflection on the Ecclesial Identity of Basic Christian Communities*, Roma, 1992, 6-118; Bishop Thomas Dabre, “The Synod for Asia and the Ecclesial Community Formation”, *Vidyajyoti* 64 (August 2000) 569-582; James O’Halloran, *Small Christian Communities*, New York: Orbis Books 1996.

living together in communion all the days of the week. Growing together in unity and fraternal love demands that people meet regularly in smaller groups in which close interaction and witnessing together are possible. BCCs make this journey to communion a reality. For when the people gather as a BCC they interact with the neighbours and witness Christ on a day-to-day basis. Since the communities are less structured, men, women, youth and children come together. They are not a crowd, but people who are responsible for and who care for one another. There is no permanent house for gathering. No economic or ethnic barriers affect such communion of communities. No more national or racial or sexist differences but only one fellowship exists. There may be pluralism in thought but there will be unity in action. For, the motivating force of this new ecclesial community is service. The Second Vatican Council in its document on the Church clearly stated the importance of communion when it said, "He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" (LG 9).

The spirituality evolved through the communion is prophetic as it touches the human life in its social, economic and political realities. It touches the heart of the people in such a way that they begin to think about their brothers and sisters around them and share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and their needs, to offer them deep and genuine fellowship.<sup>28</sup> Such a spirituality can never be satisfied or content with the theologising of the past or speculating the future but speaking the will of God evolving in the contemporary world. In the history of the Church we see that when the official Church departed from the Gospel values it was the spiritual leaders like the prophets of the OT, who came forward to renew the Church. It is enough to look at the prophetic role played by saints such as Benedict, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Theresa of Avila, Vincent Pallotti and Antonio Rosmini.

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<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001) n.43-46. In this letter the pope elaborates the spirituality of communion too.

## 2.1 Word of God & Eucharist: The Focal Points of the Spirituality of BCCs

One of the very important achievements of the formation of BCCs is that even ordinary people have begun to read the Holy Scripture in their community gatherings. The Pontifical Biblical Commission has rightly observed that, "Many 'Basic Christian Communities' 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>29</sup> In fact there is a paradigm shift as regards the approach to the Scripture. Before Second Vatican Council the Sacred Scripture was treated almost like some secret writing that should be used only by experts in theology and in official preaching. In the BCCs the people, who come as ecclesial community read the Bible, meditate over it and share their own reflections. The Word of God becomes no more a private transaction between God and some individuals, but the 'faith story' of a community of believers. Hence, the Bible belongs to the people of God as a community. Familiarising the Word of God in the BCCs through the commonly used seven steps method, developed in the Lunko Institute in South Africa, deserves special attention. The Lunko Method of Bible sharing used in the BCCs can also be compared to that of *Lectio Divina* of the monastic tradition in the Church.

### 2.1.1 *Lectio Divina* in the BCCs

*Lectio Divina* means divine reading or holy reading. It consists of four elements: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), contemplation (*contemplatio*). In Christian spirituality it can be said to be a particular way of reading and praying over the Scriptures – both from the OT and NT. This reading aims at communion with God. It is distinguished from scientific exegesis, hermeneutic and from the study of Scripture for specifically theological purposes. One who compares the spirit of the BCCs and *lectio divina* will notice that the four specific elements in *lectio*

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<sup>29</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, 125,

*divina* are blended in the spirituality of the BCCs. They are well articulated in the Gospel sharing through the seven step method: (1) inviting the Lord, (2) reading the Scripture text, (3) picking out words and mediating on them, (4) allowing the Lord to speak in silence, (5) sharing what one hears in his or her heart, (6) discussing the task which the group is called to do and finally, (7) praying together spontaneously. In short, the use of Scripture in the BCCs directs and shapes the lives of people.<sup>30</sup> The Word of God becomes the touchstone of their day-to-day life.

### 2.1.2 New Approach to Eucharist

The Word of God leads the people to the Eucharist. It becomes the centre of ecclesial spirituality. It is the memorial of the great *diakonia* of agape done on the day of the Last Supper and consummated on Good Friday. It is the greatest symbol of covenant and communion. In the communities although the Eucharist may not be celebrated everyday, but it becomes, whenever it is celebrated, part and parcel of the ecclesial community<sup>31</sup>. It becomes an occasion to proclaim the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although the Eucharist is not celebrated in the BCCs generally, it is through the BCCs that the liturgical celebrations are made lively on Sundays. For the BCCs are directly involved in giving introduction, scripture reading, prayer of the faithful, community singing, etc. In short the communitarian aspect of the Eucharist is well reflected in the celebration of Sunday liturgy. Here the people get special experience of God in the person of Jesus Christ who suffered and died and rose for them and for others. Through the active

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<sup>30</sup> Selvester Ponnunmuthan, "Lectio Divina in Basic Christian Communities," *Indian Journal of Spirituality* (April-June 1999) 297-306. See also Carlos Mesters, "How the Bible is Interpreted in Basic Christian Communities in Brazil," *Concilium* (October 1980) 40-46.

<sup>31</sup> The proposal given by Paul Puthanangady regarding the celebration of the Eucharist is worth mentioning. According to him the parish priest can celebrate the Eucharist everyday in one of the small communities. On Sundays there can be a parish Eucharist in which as many people as possible from the parish take part. Paul Puthanangady, "A New Way of Celebrating Liturgy" in *Church: A Spirit filled and Spirit led Community: Diocesan Kit*, Bangalore 1998, 1-13.

participation in the liturgy they slowly identify with the life of Jesus. This identification need not take place all on a sudden especially in the context of India. For the multi-religious phenomenon influences the Christian life of an Indian.

At the same time the people may not be able to grasp the speculative theological aspects of spirituality. Hence the spirituality of BCCs is based mainly on the personalistic dimension of God. That is why people have no difficulty to accept the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. Hence the spirituality of BCCs should also be very closely associated with the person of Jesus Christ. This becomes possible through active participation in the BCC meetings and liturgical celebrations. Through this the people come closer to Jesus and they imbibe the spirit of Him who died for others. Hence a description of the spirituality of BCCs in the context of India is relevant. And one could describe the spirituality of BCCs in the context of India as the *maturing of personal and communitarian commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to love one's neighbour in the cultural situation*.

## **2.2 Personal and Communitarian Commitment**

The spirituality of BCCs is personal and communitarian. (Rev 3:20-21). God calls everyone personally. The response to the personal call implies the building up of a community. The first words in the Bible to the human person 'Where are you?' (Gen 3:9) imply that we have been created as *response-able*, interpersonal cognitive-affective subjects whose perfection consists in the authentic communicating of divine and human fellowship. The dynamic relation between 'person' and community in human life is relevant also in the case of Christian life. The dynamic and intimate relation between 'person' and the 'community' is well expressed in the exhortation of St. Paul to the Corinthian community. According to him the particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the benefit of others (1 Cor 12:4-11). The personal and communitarian response becomes meaningful when it helps one to follow Jesus Christ. And the following of Jesus Christ is the *sine qua non* factor of the spirituality of BCCs especially in the Indian context.

## **2.3 To Follow Jesus Christ**

One of the important expressions of the spirituality of BCCs is the determination of its members to follow Jesus Christ. To follow

Jesus Christ in the biblical point of view signifies a response to his call. For example, Jesus Christ calls his disciples to follow Him (Mk 1:16-20). The initiative comes from him. The characteristic feature of 'following' both in the OT and NT come from the divine initiative. The response of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, the Apostles and the disciples testify to this divine initiative. So following Jesus means responding to his call with the assistance of His Spirit (Jn 16:13-14). According to St. Paul all the blessings which unite the Christians in fellowship are gratuitous, and he never thinks of them apart from Jesus Christ, the embodiment of all that grace signifies. And in our description of 'to follow Jesus Christ' we mean that the divine initiative to follow Jesus Christ comes from his Spirit.

As the BCCs wish to inherit the life style and spirituality of the early Christians described in Acts 2 & 4 it is quite natural that the major tenets of that spirituality also reflect in the BCCs. Looking at the nature of the early Christian life style, L. Bouyer holds the view that the soul of Christian spirituality lies in the absolutely unique influence of Jesus' words and of his personality, on his immediate discipleship.<sup>32</sup> The Christological nature of early Christian spirituality is well explained by the Apostolic Fathers too. For example St. Clement of Rome writes:

Through Him let us strain our eyes toward the heights of heaven; through Him we see mirrored His spotless and glorious countenance. Through Him the eyes of our heart have been opened; through Him our foolish and darkened understanding shoots up into the light; through Him the Lord willed that we should taste an immortal knowledge...<sup>33</sup>

Following Jesus Christ is the visible expression of the Christian response to God's call. Jesus Christ is at the centre of

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<sup>32</sup> L Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 1, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1968, 35.

<sup>33</sup> St. Clement of Rome, "Letter to the Corinthians" in H. Dressler et. al., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947) ch. 36. St. Ignatius of Antioch emphasised the uniqueness of Christ in the life of Christians. He admonished his readers to be "imitators of Jesus Christ, as He is of His Father". St. Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Philadelphians, ", in *The Fathers of the Church*, n. 7.

Christian faith. This we notice from the very beginning of Christianity. In Him God's age-long self-manifestation through human history has come to a climax. The studies on various schools of spirituality also highlight that fact that the Christological focus was one of the main characteristics of Christian spirituality throughout the history of the Church. For example there is an explicit focus in French spirituality on the person of Jesus Christ. Names like Bernard of Clairvaux, Cardinal Bérulle, Marguerite-Marie Alocque and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin hold a privileged place in the annals of Christological piety of the Catholic Church. According to John Paul II, the Church's fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct the human person's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

### **2.3.1 New Experience in Following Jesus Christ**

In the BCCs the people see the invisible presence of God in the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. They experience a personal God in Jesus Christ who not only speaks to them but also seeks them out.<sup>35</sup> The close following of Jesus Christ might not be the immediate result of the formation of BCCs, for already from the beginning of ecclesial communities, the people began to hear Jesus Christ and his Church and began to worship the God of Jesus Christ in the Church. The difference, which we notice in the present life of the Christian communities, is the new awareness of the nature of God manifested in Jesus Christ. More than the parish-centred Christianity the BCCs try to realise the personal and communitarian commitment in following Jesus Christ. Behind this commitment we see the concern and compassion of each individual for the other.

### **2.3.2 Aiming at the Kingdom**

Following Jesus Christ means living the message which he preached. The sum and substance of the teaching of Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God. In the BCCs the people realise the universal

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<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) n. 13.

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994) n. 7.

application of the message which is one of the contemporary concern of the Asian theologians too. The elements of the realisation of the Kingdom of God cannot be separated from the person who taught it for

The Kingdom of God is not a concept , a doctrine, or a programme subject to free interpretation, but is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God. If the Kingdom is separated from Jesus, it is no longer the Kingdom of God which he revealed."<sup>36</sup>

The Kingdom message of Jesus Christ is to be lived in the concrete situation by doing service to others. This is what John Paul II wished for the people of Kerala and Tamil Nadu during his visit to Trivandrum in 1986. He said,

The signs of the presence of God's Kingdom are the preaching of the Good News to the poor, the bringing the sight to the blind, the setting free of those who are oppressed, the proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord. All these mean that the Church's service to the Kingdom of God is accomplished in her service to the poor and to the suffering.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.4 To Love One's Neighbour

The commitment to follow Jesus Christ leads the members of BCCs to express their concern and commitment to their neighbours. The members are challenged to love not an imaginary neighbour but the neighbour who lives close to them, the neighbour whose children are to be sent to school, who is not able to build a house for his family, who has no means to meet the hospital expenses, who does not have a vision about his family. The phenomenon of *imaginary neighbour* we see in the cities both in the developed and developing countries. Many a time the people who live in the cities may not even know the names of their neighbours but show much zeal in helping the people of other countries and continents. Jesus Christ's command has two

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<sup>36</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, "Address to the Faithful of Kerala and Tamil Nadu at Trivandrum," 8 February, 1986" in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, IX, 1 (1986) 391-391.

dimensions: one is to love those who are close to one (Jn 13:1) and the other is to love those who are beyond one's inner circle of caste, colour and creed (Lk 10:29-37). Loving one's neighbour is loving God himself. "Anyone who says, 'I love God' and hates his brother is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he sees cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). In the concrete situation of the BCC gatherings the members encounter the poor and needy. The following story of Michael, narrated by Pius Arattukulam, well describes the nature and commitment of true BCCs.

Michael was a sturdy fisherman. He looked after his wife and children very well. One day, Peter, his neighbour, asked Michael: "Why don't you go fishing. There is good catch these days." Michael didn't say a word. He didn't go fishing either. Since two weeks Mary has been noticing something unusual in her husband. There was a weird look on his face. He disliked going out and meeting people. All the time he would sit in a corner of his hut hiding his head between his pulled-up legs. Neighbours and relatives came to see him. But he would scarcely look at them. One day Mary over heard people say: "Michael is mentally off. No body knows when he would turn violent". She cried a lot that day while praying the rosary. Everyday Mary struggled hard to feed her children. Mary's attempt to find even a menial job failed. A couple of days later the children stopped going to school. A pall of gloom descended on the family.

Or a Saturday afternoon people huddled in a group for the BCC meeting. The president of the BCC described poignantly the sad plight of Michael and his family. Everybody was interested to do something for Michael. Dixon, a pastoral council member said, "Let us organise a collection and help the family live through". Alex had another suggestion, "First let us go and see Michael and conduct prayer in his house." After a protracted discussion the gathering accepted both the suggestions. Henry had a different idea. He said, "Mr. president, I have a second thought about our decisions. Praying for the sick and taking a collection for them are the usual trouble-free way of helping a person in distress. Everything ends with that. Can't we think of a better way of reaching out to Michael with compassion? Shall we take Michael to a psychiatrist? I know the famous Dr. James. If some of you keep me company we shall go to him with Michael. The thing is we should take it as a mission to save Michael and his family". Henry's words had an electrifying effect on the BCC gathering.

Many volunteered to join the 'save Michael mission' – a few others were ready to pray in his house every Saturday. A plan of action was charted before the gathering dispersed.

A few days later during a special gathering of the BCC the president invited Henry to give a report of their mission. "Well, the other day four of us met Dr. James. He promised to bring back Mr. Michael to normal life within two months. However we should take care to give him medicine and nutritious food regularly. Michael can't afford to buy them. His wife is illiterate and earns nothing. All of us have to rise to the occasion. Let each one of us lend a helping hand to save Michael." During the discussion some promised to give money, others food items. It was a wonderful expression of solidarity. Every day of the month families took turns to supply Michael with milk, egg or meat. When its turn came a poor Hindu family plucked cashew nuts and bartered them for two eggs to be given to Michael. Henry and the team were regular in bringing Michael to Dr. James every Wednesday. Team members took turns to see Michael every other day and to monitor the mission. A month later Michael, who loathed other's company, joined the prayer meeting in his house.

In the next gathering of the BCC everybody was delighted to see Michael and his family with them. Michael thanked everyone: "But for the committed service of Mr. Henry and team and that of every family I would not have been here today. This is a sort of rebirth for me – the result of your compassionate love. In two weeks from now I shall resume my work. Our gratitude is beyond words. How can I, a poor man, repay you all. I entrust all of us to the Lord's care. May he reward us with His bountiful love." The president spoke for all, "Now I am on cloud nine. This is an extraordinary day for our BCC. Michael has stirred our conscience and unified all of us in a bond of love. We have taken upon ourselves the sufferings of Michael and his family. Every family has shared whatever they had either in cash or in kind. Some have put in their time and effort too. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us praise him. Now let us have a light refreshment in honour of Michael and family."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pius Arattukulam, "Eucharistic Community: A Pastoral Challenge," *The Living Word*, vol. 106 (November-December 2000) 362-364.

## 2.5 Solidarity with the Poor

Solidarity with the poor is closely connected with the spirituality of the BCCs. A follower of Jesus Christ cannot but be in solidarity with the poor. "True solidarity with one's neighbour is rooted in the conviction that Christ has united himself with each and every person by means of his redemptive incarnation."<sup>39</sup> Jesus Christ openly declared that he came to bring good news to the poor (Lk 4:18-19). He exhibited a special concern for those who were marked by deprivation (Mk 11:4-5) and exhorted his followers to identify with the poor who suffer from hunger, thirst, sickness, homelessness, imprisonment (Mt 25:31-46). As a response to the divine command of identification with the poor the Council says that "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in anyway, are the joy and hope, grief and anguish of the followers of Jesus Christ as well" (GS, 1). According to John Paul II, solidarity, which is a Christian virtue, helps us to see the 'other' – whether a person, people or nation, not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our neighbour, a helper (Gen 2: 18-20) to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.<sup>40</sup> When the BCCs fight against illicit distillation of alcohol, make efforts to eradicate illiteracy and fight for the rights of the minorities, these communities really express solidarity with the poor and marginalized in a concrete way. This does happen where BCCs are very active whether in Bombay or Kottar or Trivandrum

## 2.6 Living in the Cultural Situation

Solidarity with the poor has to take a concrete form. It has to be realised at the grass roots level in its cultural situation. As John Paul II notes, the Church lives and fulfils her mission in the actual circumstances of time and place. Explaining the challenges of inculturation the Pope says that "culture is the vital space within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel. Just as a culture is the result of the life and activity of a human group, so

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<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, "Address to the Bishops of the Provinces of Bhopal, Calcutta, Delhi and Ranchi at the ad Liminia," *L'Osservatore Romano* (8-29 August, 1995) 4.

<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Roma 1987) n.39. "To proclaim the universal salvific will of God in Christ means not just to talk about it, but to make it happen" See M. Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ" in S. Sugirthajah, ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus*, London: Orbis Books, 1993, 100.

the persons belonging to that group are shaped to a large extent by the culture in which they live".<sup>41</sup> That is why he exhorts the Churches in Asia to be sensitive to the religious, cultural, economic, social and political realities.<sup>42</sup>

Appreciating the spirituality of people in the living situation is not lacking in the history of spirituality also. For example according to Francis de Sales (1567-1622) it is an error or rather a heresy, to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldier, the mechanic's shop, the court of princes or the home of married people.<sup>43</sup> In order to achieve this goal the cultural factors have to be taken into account, especially in the context of India where poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, unemployment, diseases, injustices at work and in society, the deprivation of fundamental rights and discrimination because of race, religion and sex play a role.

### 3. Challenges of BCCs

One of the greatest challenges of BCCs is to live the Christian faith. For, BCCs are not mere social groupings. First of all they come together because they are called. They come as *ekklesia*. They are called by the triune God. They are called to have communion with the triune God and communion with the people of God. This communion, without doubt, is realised in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. And it is from the Eucharist, which can be celebrated in the BCCs, that all the activities of the Church are directed. The BCCs in their pilgrimage of a new way of being Church celebrate the Word of God and take its nourishment from the Eucharist, the culmination of all the sacraments. In this regard what the Puebla Conference said about the authentic Christian communities is worth mentioning:

As a community, the CEB [BCC] brings together families, adults and young people, in an intimate interpersonal relationship

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<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 21. See also J. P. Pinto, *Inculturation Through Basic Communities*, Bangalore: ATC, 1985, Gilbert de Lima, *Evangelization in India Through Basic Communities*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 1996,

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, ns.6-8.

<sup>43</sup> Francis De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Malleswaram, Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1990, 15.

grounded in the faith. As an ecclesial reality, it is a community of faith, hope and charity. It celebrates the Word of God and takes its nourishment from the Eucharist, the culmination of all the sacraments. It fleshes out the Word of God in life through solidarity and commitment to the new commandment of the Lord; and through the service of approved co-ordinators, it makes present and operative the mission of the Church and its visible communion with the legitimate pastors. It is a base-level community because it is composed of relatively few members as a permanent body, like a cell of the larger community.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that the BCCs attract people of other faiths is because of the deeper spiritual experience which the people get from the Word of God and the Christian fellowship. C. Boff rightly observes in the context of Brazil the following:

I remember when I was in a small diocese in the interior of Brazil which held a synod for pastoral workers. The books provided for them had two special chapters on spiritual renewal. We had prepared a programme for base communities, with the usual treatment of the Bible, the formation of community, participation, social questions, etc. But the members of the base communities asked why they should not be concerned also about spirituality. They wanted this. This question of the hunger for spirituality needs to be studied, because people want it.<sup>45</sup>

However one has to remember that BCCs are not just pious associations. If they are mere pious associations it is enough to gather in the churches. The BCCs have to "embody the Church's preferential love for the common people" and have to take up issues which affect human life in all its dimensions in the light of the teachings of the Church. Here the BCCs differ also from the pious associations or even those movements, which close their eyes to the social needs of the people. In taking up the social issues the BCCs cannot be narrow minded. If it takes up only the issues related to one particular parish or diocese it cannot claim to be the

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<sup>44</sup> "Puebla Final Document" n. 641, in J. Eagleson and P. Scharper, ed., *Puebla and Beyond*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, 212.

<sup>45</sup> C. Boff, "The Church in Latin America: between Perplexity and Creativity," *SEDOS Bulletin* (15 May 1995) 131-132.

'light of the nations'. It might also fail to be the 'joy and hope' of the modern world. Instead, joining with other religious and secular organisations the BCCs have to work for the common good of the people of God.

Another challenge the BCCs face is the danger of institutionalisation. Although the BCCs envisage a participatory Church we cannot rule out the possibility of institutionalisation. For the BCCs are structured in such a way that every one in a particular geographical vicinity becomes automatically a member of it. The automatic membership has both positive and negative effects. Positively we can say that all are included in any one of the BCCs and negatively a member need not be a participant in the BCC which in turn demands personal commitment. Moreover because of the automatic membership there is possibility of imposing certain regulations, may be for the betterment of the parish, which need not show the spirit of the Church. One such case is when a person from another denomination or religion wishes to accept the Catholic faith, the parish councils impose certain pastoral regulations. Whereas the newcomers would get a warm welcome in other denominations. C. Boff's observations seem to be right in many cases. According to him the sects know how to receive newcomers, how to welcome them and make them feel at home. They know how to put the believer in direct contact with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit and with the Father without any institutionalised intermediary. They can give believers real ecclesial feelings, without the conviction of being part of the Church, in touch with God, responsible for mission, battling with the devil. They are in immediate touch with God, whereas Catholics have to go through a whole series of mediators.<sup>46</sup> The situations can become worse if BCCs dictate norms about those who do not participate in the gatherings and insist that one should pass through BCCs for parish services like baptism, confirmation and marriage. Sometimes priests may also insist that a participation in the BCC is essential to receive the sacraments. Such administrative or bureaucratic attitudes defeat the spirit of BCCs. Ultimately the BCCs fail to show Jesus Christ's concern and compassion, the essence of spirituality. It is through compassion that BCCs can present a correct image of God.

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<sup>46</sup> C. Boff, "The Church in Latin America", 139-140.

## Conclusion

In the light of our discussion we would say that if the BCCs are really led by the Spirit of God, they have to broaden their vision reaching to the formation of basic human communities with fidelity to Christian faith and more creative openness to God's kingdom which encompasses relationships between God and humankind. The Kingdom of God symbolises the presence of the powerful yet compassionate God who brings salvation to the universe.<sup>47</sup>

The inner dynamism of the BCCs or the Spirituality of the BCCs should also challenge each member to *put off the mantles* of narrow-mindedness, intolerance, racism, fundamentalism etc., like that of Bartimeus to follow Jesus Christ. And in Basic Human Communities one could take a prophetic role to be the *light of the world*<sup>48</sup> helping the people to move from partial vision to the global vision (Mk 8:22-26). Since the Basic Human Communities are in dialogue with the world, they can give a sympathetic response to the new forms of poverty in an unjust and impoverished world (GS 93). If the BCCs are really led by the Spirit they can also say that *no one will steal their song* like those of the Argentinian Basic Christian Communities.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> G. Rosales – C.G. Arévalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference's Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1992, 314.

<sup>48</sup> J. Fuellenbach speaks of the role of Church in the changing world comparing it to a ship that is equipped with enormous lights moving through the centuries indicating to other ships on the ocean which way they should move in order to reach the shores of salvation. According to him the Church's mission is perceived not as taking people from their ship into the 'bark of St. Peter' but rather to indicate to them which way to steer their boats. See J. Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Central Message of Jesus' Teachings in the Light of the Modern world*, Manila: Logos Publications, 1993, 276. See also M. Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions", 85-103

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Hebblethwaite while attending the Congress of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Argentina in 2001 observes that many of those who attended the congress had suffered their own tragedies but refused to give up their faith and hope. The song they sang during the congress reflects their determination: They have stolen from us even our spring; But They cannot steal our song; It seems fragile, but those like you and I, Who keep on singing, will never surrender. See Margaret Hebblethwaite, "They Cannot Steal Our Song", *The Tablet* (22 September 2001) 1352.