

AWARENESS OF BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY (BEC) AMONG PRIESTS IN CENTRAL PHILIPPINES: BASIS FOR SEMINARY-CLERGY CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract

This study sought to determine the level of awareness of priests in Central Philippines in their familiarity with Church documents on Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC), BEC Spirituality, and BEC Organizing, aimed at enhancing the seminary curriculum centered on the context of the recipients of their mission. The data used were obtained using a validated and reliability-tested researcher-made questionnaire. Statistical analysis used were the mean and standard deviation for descriptive problems and t-test, ANOVA, and Pearson Product Moment of Correlation for inferential problems. The findings reveal that the priests were very aware of the BEC. However, the result of the combined dioceses yielded a high level of awareness in BEC spirituality while awareness in organizing BEC was lowest. These results prompted the researcher to recommend enhancing the seminary curriculum as well as the on-going education of priests that would bring about BEC awareness in all 3 aspects.

Keywords: Identical Elements, Basic Ecclesial Community, BEC Organizing, BEC Spirituality, Seminary Education, Clergy On-going Formation.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Managing the transfer and conversion of knowledge learned in a classroom into the actual environment always poses a challenge for education managers and curriculum developers. In many cases, as in the idea of Thorndike on Identical Elements, it is shown that the input has to resemble more the reality towards which this input will be practiced or put into use (Royer, 1978). Hence, one can say that the reality in perspective influences the vision or the kind of input an educator facilitates in the educational process with the students.

Seminary formation is not different. Here priest candidates are prepared to be responsive to the kind of Church into which they will be introduced after years of seminary formation. Thereafter, they are assisted in their ministry through various forms of ongoing education or interventions. Seminary educators and clergy formators, therefore, have to be conscious of the kind of Church that is unfolding so that formation and education programs for the clergy will be relevant and effective (Schuth, 2016).

Faced with the reality of rapid changes in the 20th century world the Catholic Church through the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) came up with a vision of a renewed Church outlined in its document *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) as not only an institution but as a communion whose members – clergy and laity – experience unity and actively participate in the life and mission of the Church (Picardal 2012). This vision of a renewed church was further developed in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCPII) in 1991 which describes it as a Community of Disciples, living in *communion* and participating in the mission of Christ as a *prophetic, priestly and kingly people* and as the *Church of the Poor*.

The inclusion of the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) as an integral part of priestly formation had already been introduced since the mid-1970s in some seminaries and religious centers of on-going formation (Picardal, 2012). This was officially decreed through PCP II which eventually found

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expression in the Updated Philippine Program for Priestly Formation where structures and formative experiences were oriented towards BEC (Alminaza, 2009).

Despite these, we hear feedback, especially from the lay faithful, that the lack of support and lack of initiative of the clergy in organizing BECs hinder their growth. This was revealed in the BEC Primer prepared by the Episcopal Committee on BEC in 2015 (Picardal, 2015).

It is in the light of this seeming discrepancy between the Church's desire to promote BEC and the lack of implementation prompted the researcher to examine the level of awareness of the clergy about BEC as a basis for the enhancement of the seminary curriculum and on-going formation of priests.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the level of awareness of priests about Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC). Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of BEC awareness of priests in terms of familiarity with Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood?
2. Is there a significant difference between the level of awareness of priests in terms of Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood?
3. Based on the findings of the study what enhancement program will be formulated?

Hypothesis

Given the specific problems, the following hypothesis is advanced:

1. There is no significant difference between the level of awareness of priests in terms of Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The present study is anchored on the Theory of Identical Elements developed by Thorndike (2001). According to this theory, transfer occurs from one situation to another in which there are most similar or identical elements. It explains that carrying over from one situation to another is roughly proportional to the degree of resemblance in a situation, in other words- the more the similarity, the more the transfer. The degree of transfer increases as the similarity of

elements increases. It states that the level of training transfer depends on the level of similarity between training and performance environments. In other words, the theory states that there is a positive correlation between the similarities between training and performance environments and the level of training transfer. It is the ability to apply knowledge learned in one context to new contexts. Transfer of learning occurs when the learner: recognizes common features among concepts, skills, or principles; links the information in memory; and sees the value of utilizing what was learned in one situation in another.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The present study is anchored on the concept of Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) of a renewed Church. For PCP II, the vision of the Church finds expression in the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Its priority is forming and revitalizing of Basic Ecclesial Communities in every parish as agents of communion, participation and mission. In this vision of a new way of being church, the important role of the priest as leader and pastor in organizing the communities is recognized by PCP II as it decreed the orientation of priests and the inclusion of BEC in seminary curriculum.

The BECs are local communities of Catholic Christians at the neighborhood and villages within the parish. They gather regularly to share the Word of God and live it in their daily life, to pray and celebrate their faith (Rayappan, 2024). They share their resources and find ways to help and serve one another. In the BECs the members know each other, they have a strong sense of belonging and responsibility for one another. The Catholic families are linked to other families in the neighborhoods and organized as family groupings or BEC cells. The neighborhood cells or family groupings are linked to each other and comprise the chapel-level or area level BECs. These BECs are linked to other BECs through the larger parish.

Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive research design was utilized in this study (Ardales, 2008). This method is appropriate for this study as it will enable the researcher to determine the awareness of BEC among the priests in central Philippines to which its findings will result to an enhancement program.

Locale and Respondents of the Study

The study was conducted in the four Dioceses central Philippines. The respondents of this study were priests who are ministering in 4 dioceses in Central Philippines who were selected through stratified sampling procedure. Below is Table 1 showing the distribution of the respondents of the study:

Respondents	N	F
A. As a Whole	201	100%
B. Diocese		
Diocese 1	80	39.80
Diocese 2	56	27.86
Diocese 3	27	13.43
Diocese 4	39	18.57
C. Seminary Graduated from	57	27.14
Regional Seminary 1	73	34.76
Regional Seminary 2	71	35.32
Others		
D. Place of Assignment	106	52.74
Rural	95	47.26
Urban		
E. Years in Priesthood	95	47.26
Younger (<12years)	106	52.74
Older (12 years & above)		

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

Research Instrument

The instrument used to gather data for this study was a researcher-made instrument. It is composed of two (2) parts.

Part One of the questionnaire used to gather data for the respondents' profile which consisted of Diocese, Seminary Graduated from, Place of assignment and years in priesthood. Part Two of the instrument was the questionnaire on the awareness of BEC in terms of church documents, organizing and spirituality. The level of awareness of BECs of the respondents was interpreted as follows:

Mean Rating Scale	Verbal Interpretation
2.35 – 3.00	Very Aware
1.68 – 2.34	Aware
1.00 – 1.67	Not Aware

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study and schedule for conducting it was secured at the Office of the Bishops. The researcher personally administered the instrument to the respondents. The researcher assured the respondents of the confidentiality of the data gathered and the manner in which to answer the

instrument. The respondents were asked to answer three parts of the instrument. The answered instruments were personally gathered by the researcher.

Data Analysis Procedure

To determine the level of BEC awareness of priests in central Philippines in terms of familiarity with Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood, Mean and Standard Deviation were utilized.

While to determine the significant difference between the level of awareness of priests in the central part of the Philippines in terms of Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood, t- test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between level of awareness and place of assignment and level of awareness and years in priesthood and to determine if there was a significant difference between the level of awareness and diocese and the level of awareness and seminary graduated from, ANOVA was utilized.

Presentation, Analyses and Interpretation of Data

Level of Awareness of the BEC

An objective of this study is to determine level of BEC awareness of priests in central Philippines in terms of familiarity with Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood. Table 2 presents the level of BEC awareness of priests in central Philippines in terms of familiarity with Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood.

Variable	Familiarity with Church Documents			Organizing			Spirituality			As a Whole		
	Mean	SD	VI	Mean	SD	VI	Mean	SD	VI	Mean	SD	VI
Diocese	2.68	.29	VA	2.69	.30	VA	2.63	.31	A	2.57	.37	A
Diocese 1	2.69	.27	VA	2.59	.30	VA	2.73	.38	A	2.66	.27	A
Diocese 2	2.66	.37	VA	2.62	.34	VA	2.78	.40	A	2.66	.33	A

Diocese 3	2.74	.25	VA	2.71	.30	VA	2.83	.30	V A	2.75	.26	V A
Diocese 4	2.73	.29	VA	2.68	.33	VA	2.85	.27	V A	2.73	.26	V A
Seminary Graduated From												
Regional Seminary 1	2.71	.26	VA	2.64	.30	VA	2.73	.34	V A	2.68	.26	V A
Regional Seminary 2	2.67	.32	VA	2.58	.35	VA	2.76	.38	V A	2.46	.30	V A
Others	2.71	.32	VA	2.67	.30	VA	2.85	.33	V A	2.72	.29	V A
Place of Assignment												
Rural	2.65	.35	VA	2.57	.35	VA	2.71	.40	V A	2.62	.32	V A
Urban	2.73	.23	VA	2.69	.26	VA	2.86	.27	V A	2.74	.22	V A
years in priesthood												
shorter (< 12 yrs)	2.75	.29	VA	2.62	.31	VA	2.79	.35	V A	2.68	.28	V A
longer (12 yrs & above)	2.68	.30	VA	2.63	.32	VA	2.77	.35	V A	2.68	.29	V A

Table 2: Level of BEC Awareness of the Respondents

Note: 1.00-1.66 – Unaware (UA)
1.67-2.33 – Aware (A)
2.34-3.00 – Very Aware (VA)

Table 2 shows the level of BEC awareness of priests in central Philippines in terms of familiarity with Church Documents, Organizing, and Spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood. The respondents, as an entire group, were “very aware” of the BEC. (M=2.27, SD=.37).

When grouped as to diocese, all 4 dioceses have spirituality as the highest mean while having organizing as the lowest. The same is true when the 3 seminaries the priests graduated from, their place of assignment, and the number of years they spent in priesthood are considered. As shown in the table, regardless of variables, “spirituality” has the highest mean and “organizing” has the lowest mean.

The priests’ perception of themselves in terms of Awareness of BEC having spirituality with the highest mean is expected. Priesthood as a vocation is itself a spirituality. BEC spirituality indicates the unitive and communal function of priests. Daniel

O’Leary would give the title to the priest as “Weaver of Wholeness”. (O’Leary, 1997). Fr. Picardal (2012) presented occasions wherein the spirituality of BEC can be experienced in the seminary. Seminaries are loci of community life and fraternal communion.

The preparation of soon to be priests in the seminary can contribute very much in this awareness. With the introduction of the Updated Philippine Program for Priestly Formation (UPPPF) new structures and processes are being introduced that promotes awareness of BEC. In fact, it recommends training on pastoral skills including organizing BECs (UPPPF, 158).

Difference between the Awareness Level of Priests in central Philippines in terms of Identified Variables

Another objective of this study was to determine the difference between the level of awareness of priests in the central Philippines in terms of church documents, organizing, and spirituality when grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood. Results are reflected in Tables 3 and 4.

Variable	Familiarity with Church Documents				Organizing				Spirituality			
	Mean	T	P	VI	Mean	t	p	VI	Mean	t	P	VI
place of assignment												
rural	2.514	-1.916	.000	Sig	2.410	-2.869	.012	Sig	2.515	2.946	.000	Sig
urban	2.570				2.481				2.634			
Years in Priesthood												
shorter (< 12 yrs)	2.700	.245	.758	Not Sig	2.629	-.082	.936	Not Sig	2.794	.402	.884	Not Sig
longer (12 yrs & above)	2.689				2.633				2.77			

Table 3: t-test Result for the Difference in the Level of BEC Awareness in Terms of Place of Assignment and Years in Priesthood

Variables	Familiarity of Church Documents						Organizing						Spirituality					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	VI	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	VI	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	VI
Diocese																		
Between Grps	2.675	3	0.892	6.424	0.000	Sig	2.647	3	0.882	5.708	0.000	Sig	1.186	3	0.395	2.916	0.000	Sig
Within Grps	27.347	197	0.139				30.457	197	0.155				26.716	197	0.136			
Total	30.022	200					33.104						27.902					
Seminary Graduated																		
Between Grps	0.622	2	0.311	2.093	0.126	Not Sig	0.953	2	0.477	2.935	0.055	Not Sig	0.944	2	0.472	3.466	0.035	Sig
Within Grps	29.4	198	0.148				32.151	198	0.162				26.958	198	0.136			

Table 4: ANOVA Test Results on the Difference in the Level of BEC Awareness in Terms of Diocese and Seminary Graduated

Tables 3 and 4 present the difference between the level of awareness of priests in central Philippines in terms of church documents, organizing, and spirituality when taken as a whole and grouped according to diocese, seminary graduated from, place of assignment, and years in priesthood.

t-test result in Table 3 revealed that there is significant difference between place of assignment and all the 3 aspects considered. However, when years in priesthood is taken there is no significant difference with all the 3 aspects. ANOVA test result in Table 4 revealed that in terms of diocese, a significant difference was noted in all 3 aspects. As to seminary graduated from, significant difference is noted only in the aspect of spirituality.

The significant difference in the awareness of BEC of the priests in the four dioceses is indicative of the fact that BECs in the Philippines did not emerge and develop at the same time. Likewise, BECs have to contend with various socio-political situation from the 70's through the 80's, as well as technological and cultural changes of recent times. (Picardal, 2011).

Summary of Findings

The findings of this investigation are presented as follows:

1. In terms of the awareness of the BEC, regardless of variable "spirituality" has the highest mean, and "organizing" has the lowest mean. Diocese 3 has the highest awareness of the BEC as compared to other dioceses. Those who graduated from other seminaries have the highest awareness of the BEC as compared to those who graduated from Regional Seminary 1 and Regional Seminary 2. Those who were assigned in the urban area has the higher awareness of the BEC as compared to those who were assigned in the rural area. Priests who have been in their vocation for shorter or longer period of time has the same level of awareness of the BEC.
2. In terms of awareness of BEC, significant difference was noted with place of assignment when compared to all 3 aspects. This is in contrast when years in priesthood was considered which yielded no significant difference with all 3 aspects.

While, when the variable seminary graduated from was considered, there is significant difference only in spirituality.

Conclusion

Based on the findings enumerated the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The priests in central Philippines have higher consciousness on items concerning BEC spirituality that touches on love of God and the Eucharist as as sensitivity to the context and life of the community. However, they need to learn more the ways of organizing BECs.
2. Seminaries where candidates for priesthood are sent differ in terms of their BEC awareness program.
3. The priests in central Philippines were immersing themselves in the word of God through reading and meditation. They also encouraged active participation of the faithful during the Eucharist, their lives are congruent to the lives of the people in the community, they gave ample time to join in the activities of the BECs, they shared their resources with the people in the community, they have visited a member of the community who were in a difficult situation and always solicit the participation of the community in doing mission.
4. Awareness of BEC differs in terms of place of assignment, diocese and seminary graduated from. However, years in priesthood has no bearing when it comes to BEC awareness.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, and conclusions derived from the study, the following recommendations are formulated:

1. In order to enhance awareness of BEC Organizing it will be beneficial that Seminary Administrators and Curriculum Planners systematically incorporate BEC Organizing as a course in the curriculum of the seminary. The Bishop together with the seminary formators may examine seminary structures and processes, modifying them towards what promotes BEC awareness.
2. The Bishop and the diocesan pastoral director may incorporate awareness sessions on BEC Organizing in the on-going formation program of priests. The Bishop with his Presbyteral Council may establish or reinforce participatory structures and processes in the different levels of church structure.
3. Require every student in the proposed BEC Organizing course to be able to actually

organize at least a community before one can graduate.

4. A pastoral exposure program on BEC and a regular re-tooling skills training for priests in the field may be programmed.
5. Unify and align the awareness programs for BEC Organizing among dioceses and seminaries serving the dioceses in central Philippines.

Future research may be conducted with a focus on the level of how the clergy put into practice their awareness of BEC in terms of implementing what was stipulated in the Church's documents, organizing BECs, and witnessing the spirituality espoused by this new way of being church. Further, research may be conducted that will explore other variables not covered in the present study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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