

## THE PRELATURE OF LIBMANAN, 1989-2008: THE JOURNEY THAT WAS

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### A New Local Church Comes into Being<sup>1</sup>

Libmanan could have been just another ordinary town in the province of Camarines Sur (Philippines) as it has been that way for a long, long time. Apart from being known as the hometown of the Second Bicolano Bishop, Santiago Sancho,<sup>2</sup> there was nothing else of importance within the purview of ecclesiastical history that might be said about this otherwise quiet town. But in 1989, something was going to happen that would change its image and its significance to the Bicol Church.

It was during this year, on January 12, when Leonardo Legaspi, the Dominican Archbishop of Caceres since 1984, sent a petition to the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, asking for the creation of a prelatore out of his vast territory that covered the entire province of Camarines Sur.<sup>3</sup> His territory, the Archdiocese of Caceres, at the time such petition was made, had 1.30 million inhabitants, out of which 1.13 million were Catholics. Legaspi argued that such a “large area of ecclesiastical territory” with such a “great number of people to be served” justified the creation of another ecclesiastical territory. The situation was aggravated by the perception that, five years into Legaspi’s term, the demand was growing for more efficient administration. As Legaspi saw it, this was made even much more difficult to provide due to the lack of roads and means of communication. He thereby saw a strong case for the dismemberment of Caceres to give way to the creation of a new ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

After diligent study and upon consultation with his suffragan bishops in the Bicol Region, Legaspi designated the northern part of his territory, that is, all nine municipalities of the first district, including one municipality in the second district, all of Camarines Sur, as the area most suited to constitute the new ecclesiastical territory. He also chose Libmanan, arguably the biggest municipality in the area in terms of land size and population, as the seat of the new territory. It was to be called the *Prelature of Libmanan*.

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<sup>1</sup> This historical work heavily relies on the data provided by two previous works on the subject: G. Argarin in his license thesis entitled, *A Historico-Canonical Evaluation of the Canonical Erection of Libmanan as a Prelature towards Its Being a “Diocese”*, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 2002, esp. p. 12-45; I. Trillanes, *The Role of BECs in the Renewal of the Local Church in the Prelature of Libmanan*, Masteral and License Thesis, University of Santo Tomas, Manila. Trillanes wrote extensively on the three Pastoral Assemblies of the Prelature of Libmanan.

<sup>2</sup> Second only to *Jorge Barlin*, the first Filipino and Bicolano Bishop, *Santiago Sancho* became Bishop of Tuguegarao in 1917 and the Bishop of Nueva Segovia in 1927. Following the elevation of Nueva Segovia in 1951 as an Archdiocese, Sancho also became its first Archbishop. He was born in Libmanan on May 23, 1880 and died on October 12, 1966, at the age of 86, while still in office as Archbishop of Nueva Segovia.

<sup>3</sup> See letter of L. Legaspi to Pope John Paul II, dated January 12, 1989.

That it was being proposed as a prelatore was prompted no doubt by the fact that the situation in the new territory did not meet the requirements of a full diocese. Financial stability, for one thing, was wanting as it was projected to depend solely on the CBCP Common Fund, the donations from the faithful (who were mainly poor) and occasional requests for extraordinary subsidy from the Pontifical Mission Works as means of support.<sup>4</sup> It can be gleaned from a previous correspondence with the Apostolic Nunciature that Legaspi's original intent was to propose the new territory as an Apostolic Vicariate so it could be assured of pontifical subsidy. Seeing, however, that the great majority in the proposed territory were Catholics, Bruno Torpigliani, the Apostolic Nuncio then, did not see any reason why the Holy See should provide such subsidy by granting it the status of an Apostolic Vicariate.<sup>5</sup> Given such reasons already mentioned, and given this view from the Holy See, Legaspi settled instead for the creation of a new Prelature in his final petition to the Holy See.

Acting on such petition, the Holy See, eleven months thereafter, on December 9, 1989, issued the Bull, *Philippinis in insulis*, creating the Prelature of Libmanan, making it the sixth suffragan territory of the Metropolitan See of Caceres, and the seventh ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the Bicol Region. The new territory covered all nine municipalities in the first district of Camarines Sur that included *Del Gallego, Ragay, Lupi, Sipocot, Cabusao, Libmanan, Pamplona, Pasacao, San Fernando, Minalabac* and one municipality in the second district, *Milaor*, just a little Southwest of Naga City. Geographically, the Prelature is bounded in the North by Basud, Camarines Norte (Diocese of Daet), in the East by San Miguel Bay, in the West by Ragay Gulf and Quezon Province (Diocese of Gumaca), and in the South by Naga City (Archdiocese of Caceres).<sup>6</sup>

In another Bull, on the same date, the Holy See appointed *Prospero Nale Arellano* of Bombon, Camarines Sur and erstwhile Parish Priest of St. Raphael the Archangel Parish (Pili, Camarines Sur), as the First Bishop-Prelate of Libmanan.<sup>7</sup> The Bishop-Elect had been for a number of years, Rector and Professor at both the Holy Rosary Minor Seminary and the Holy Rosary Major Seminary in the mother Archdiocese of Caceres, and Parish Priest of Our Lady of Fatima Parish in San Isidro, Iriga City, before he moved to St. Raphael Parish in Pili.

Three months and ten days after the announcement of the creation of the Prelature, on March 19, 1990, the Prelature was canonically erected in solemn rites, with no less than then Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, *Bruno Torpigliani*, presiding. The Prelature took St. Joseph as its Principal Patron, that day being his feast. At the same time, Arellano was ordained bishop by the Apostolic Nuncio and installed as the First Bishop-Prelate of the new local Church and See of Libmanan.

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<sup>4</sup> See documents supporting the petition for the creation of the prelatore as compiled in G. Argarin's *A Historico-Canonical Evaluation of the Canonical Erection of Libmanan as a Prelature*, p. 142-146, 171-175.

<sup>5</sup> See letter of Bruno Torpigliani to L. Legaspi, dated November 16, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Topographically, the new Prelature lies on a terrain strewn with rolling hills and mountains, its climate not differing from much of the rest of Mid-Eastern Philippines on the Island of Luzon.

<sup>7</sup> The Bull read in part, "*Dilecto filio Prospero Arellano hactenus in Seminario archidioecesis magistro, electo Episcopo Prelato Libmanano salutem et Apostolicam Benedictionem...*"

The new Prelature covered a land area measuring some 1,862.28 square kilometers,<sup>8</sup> with about 391,924 inhabitants,<sup>9</sup> out of which 322,707 (or 82.3%)<sup>10</sup> were Catholics. Assisting the new Bishop-Prelate were 18 diocesan priests actively serving in the Chancery and in the 16 parishes,<sup>11</sup> including 3 retired priests, which initially comprised the entire jurisdiction. Of these 18, only 3 were native-born (that is, coming from the Prelature itself), the other 15 having come from the Archdiocese of Caceres. The prospect, however, that the number of native-born priests might increase in the future was rather bright since at the time of separation, there were already 15 major seminarians and 3 minor seminarians, all coming from the Prelature, though still being formed in the seminaries of the mother diocese. There were also 9 religious sisters, coming from 3 religious congregations, who were involved in various apostolates in the Prelature.<sup>12</sup>

Poor as the Prelature may have been from the very beginning, it could also not be denied that there was just so much potential for development and growth. But obviously it was not going to be easy. For one thing, the Prelature had no pastoral program of its own. For many of its needs, it still had to depend on the resources of the mother diocese. Having no Catechetical Center of its own, for example, it had to send its Catechists to the Caceres Catechetical Center for training and formation. Furthermore, most of what was done in the parishes followed the WESTY structure/framework in Caceres. Indeed, during those first few years of existence, the Prelature could not quite separate itself completely from the mother diocese. For one thing, its priests and Church

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<sup>8</sup> In the situationer prepared by the Archdiocese of Caceres to support its petition for the creation of the Prelature of Libmanan, the total land area was pegged at 1,958.13 square kilometers. See documents supporting the petition for the creation of the prelature as compiled in G. Argarin's *A Historico-Canonical Evaluation of the Canonical Erection of Libmanan as a Prelature*, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> The primary occupation of the people in the Prelature is farming. Indeed, most households here include rice farmers as well as those cultivating other crops and vegetables. This and other contextual details are derived from the license and masteral thesis of I. Trillanes, *The Role of BECs in the Renewal of the Local Church in the Prelature of Libmanan*.

<sup>10</sup> These figures are taken from the *Anuario Pontificio 1991*. G. Argarin mentions two different data owing to two different sources as far as the measurement of the population is concerned: a) in one place, he measures the total population at 348,617 inhabitants (among whom 305,839 were Catholics or 87.72%) as mentioned in the petition letter for the creation of the prelature, and b) in another place, 398,324 inhabitants (among whom 348,617 were Catholics or 87.52%), reflecting the figures provided by the Board of Census. See G. Argarin *A Historico-Canonical Evaluation of the Canonical Erection of Libmanan as a Prelature*, p. 34-35.

<sup>11</sup> These parishes were: *Sta. Rita Parish* (Del Gallego), *San Lorenzo Ruiz Parish* (GRS, Ragay), *Holy Trinity Parish* (Ragay), *St. Peter Baptist Parish* (Lupi), *St. Pius X Parish* (Villazar, Sipocot), *St. John the Baptist Parish* (Sipocot), *St. Paschal Baylon Parish* (Bercelonita, Cabusao), *St. Bernardine of Siena Parish* (Cabusao), *St. James the Great Parish* (Libmanan), *St. Vincent Ferrer Parish* (San Vicente, Libmanan), *Our Lady of the Pillar Parish* (San Isidro, Libmanan), *St. Michael the Archangel Parish* (Pamplona), *St. Rose of Lima Parish* (Pasacao), *St. John the Baptist Parish* (San Fernando), *St. Joseph the Worker Parish* (Milaor) and *Sts. Philip and James Parish* (Minalabac).

<sup>12</sup> There were 3 sisters belonging to the *St. Paul de Chartres Congregation* (SPC) working at the Bicol Sanitarium (Bercelonita, Cabusao), 4 Dominican sisters (Order of Preachers of St. Catherine of Siena) at the Colegio del Santisimo Rosario (Libmanan), and 2 sisters of the Daughters of Mary (DM) doing parish and catechetical work in GRS, Ragay.

personnel had to be enrolled into the Health Insurance System of the diocese of origin because it was not just possible at that time to set up a similar system in the Prelature. Its priests at one time even had to join the clergy of Caceres for their annual retreat.

But this was to be expected of a new territorial jurisdiction. Part of the pangs of birth, as it were, the Prelature had to establish its own identity as a local Church. It had to set up its own organizational structure and make it function efficiently according to the norms of Canon Law. It had to determine and harness its own resources to ensure stability in its operations. Most importantly, it must find a way of carrying out the work of evangelization on its own and to provide the means to support its apostolates.

### **The First Pastoral Assembly of Libmanan (PAPL I)**

The situation, however, did not stay this way for so long. Almost one year after its canonical erection, the Prelature found a new source of impetus for a new beginning, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), held in Manila on January 20 to February 17, 1991, and convened by the Archbishop of Caceres and then CBCP President, Leonardo Legaspi.

The holding of the Plenary Council gave the Prelature the occasion to conduct its own consultations and conferences in the parishes aimed at obtaining an adequate picture of the situation of the local Church, something that the Prelature's delegates needed to know before proceeding to the Council.

Already at this point, both the clergy and the lay faithful realized that a different situation was evolving in the Prelature, with its own peculiar needs and problems that were quite distinct from those of the metropolitan Church. This realization, coupled with the fresh insights that the Council would later on provide, would help determine the future agenda in the life and mission of the Prelature. Though, of course, this was not yet evident to everyone concerned at this point in time. Of particular importance, for instance, was how the council participants defined what to them should be the image of the Church in the Philippines, that is, as a "*Community of Disciples*" and a "*Church of the Poor*", where leadership is exercised in the context of servanthood – thus, defining the identity of the priest as "*servant-leader*" as well.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, PCP II served as an inspiration to many dioceses in the Philippines. Not long after it concluded, in August 1991, the Archdiocese of Caceres, the Metropolitan See in the Bicol Region held its own Pastoral Council, not only to reflect on the insights of PCP II, but also to formulate and implement a pastoral program that drew inspiration from the PCP II decrees. Other Bicol dioceses followed the lead and convened their own diocesan synods. The Prelature of Libmanan was not to be left behind. On September 6-10, 1992, Bishop Arellano called for a "*pastoral consultation*" that was convened around the theme, "*A Living Faith for a Renewed Church*". This gathering of all priests and lay

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<sup>13</sup> See *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 20 January – 17 February 1991*, CBCP, Manila, 1992, # 529, p. 181.

representatives of the Prelature held at Betania Retreat House in Iriga City, evolved into what is now called the “*First Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan*” (PAPL I).<sup>14</sup>

The discussions of PAPL I proceeded in three stages.<sup>15</sup> First, existing pastoral programs and structures, both in the Prelature as a whole and in the individual parishes, were examined and evaluated. The evaluation was done according to different areas of concern that were labelled in terms of such operational concepts as *kerygma* (the proclamation of the gospel), *liturgia* (the sacraments and sacramentals), *koinonia* (the building of the community of disciples), *diakonia* (internal service), and *martyria* (external service). The evaluation of these areas of concern yielded results that were in turn categorized qualitatively into either *crisis* (limitations and difficulties) or *kairos* (strengths, assets and potentials).

Thus, in the area of *kerygma*, it was observed that many Catholics knew very little about their faith and therefore also lacked proper understanding thereof, mainly because of the scarcity of evangelizers as the work of evangelization was too priest-dependent (crisis). Yet the situation was not completely without hope since efforts were also being expended to train catechists and lay leaders on an ongoing basis (kairos). Sadly, the kerygmatic crisis as it were also had unfortunate consequences in the area of *liturgia*, in that people’s participation in the liturgy was generally lukewarm, again because of the lack of pre-sacramental catechesis, subsequently preventing the faithful from internalizing the meaning and value of the sacraments, and leaving unchecked their beliefs that bordered on superstition (crisis). On the other hand, the intensification of formation for the various liturgical ministries was also undeniable, and masses were becoming more available to the faithful as these were now being celebrated even in the villages (kairos).

Moving on further to the area of *koinonia*, the social and political condition prevailing in the Prelature, as it did in the whole country, was one that bred not fellowship and communion but rather division and conflict among the people, the ordinary citizens having to live under constant threat to their peace, security and well-being (crisis). In spite of this, initiatives were also being taken to empower the laity in lay movements, organizations and in pastoral councils (kairos).

The same pattern is noticeable in the area of *diaconia*. Volunteers to carry on the social apostolate were scarce and funds were insufficient to sustain other Church-related services. This situation was exacerbated by pastoral programs that were rather limited and lacking in integration (crisis). Nonetheless, this was offset by the efforts of some sectors of society, mainly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to provide much-

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<sup>14</sup> The participants to this first ever prelature-wide gathering of such significance were the bishop himself, twenty one priests, two religious priests, and twenty five lay leaders. See Quinquennial Report, January 1, 1990 to December 31, 1994, p. 18; Center for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (CENDHARRA), Letters to Felix Vistal, dated March 16, 1992 and August 19, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> The data presented here is derived from the license and masteral thesis of I. Trillanes, *The Role of BECs in the Renewal of the Local Church in the Prelature of Libmanan*. Trillanes’s work in turn gives access to the many sources that it mentions in its notes.

needed social services especially to the urban poor and to those in the rural areas (kairos).

Finally, in the area of *martyria*, it was observed that other religious sects and denominations did not escape being the object of Catholic bias and prejudice (crisis). But this did not mean that steps were not being taken, as indeed there were continuous efforts, to engage in ecumenical dialogue (kairos).

Besides having to deal with this dialectical tension between crisis and kairos, one other concern (problem) that the local of Church had to confront was the widespread dehumanizing poverty of her people. There was difficulty in implementing some, if not most of the existing pastoral programs because they frequently had no bearing on this real situation of poverty and accordingly did not correspond to the needs of the people. Irrelevant, therefore, as these programs had become, there obviously was need to redirect their goals and orientation in a way that would make them more responsive to the burdens that people had to carry because of their situation.

All these insights provided the backdrop from where the discussions further moved into the second stage, that is, the formulation of the Prelature's vision and mission. For the first time in its existence, the Prelature was able to define its own identity around a *vision* of its being a local Church and sought to fulfill this vision in its *mission statement* as follows:

*We, the local Church of the Prelature of Libmanan, though young yet rich in heritage, beset with diversified conflicts, extreme poverty, countless injustices and crisis in faith, aware of our role as Sacrament of Salvation, envision a renewed Church characterized by an evangelized and evangelizing Community of Disciples, after the image of the Holy Trinity, journeying with Christ in the Poor, for the total transformation of creation.*

*To realize this vision, with the inspiration of Mary, our Ina and model in faith, we commit ourselves to: wholistic integral and inculturated evangelization; participative ministry to witnessing small faith communities; and the responsible stewardship of creation.*

From now on, the Prelature was to have a solid direction and focus in its life and mission. Henceforth, there was more reason to immediately move forward, and more so in the coming years. In the third and final stage of the discussions, guided and inspired by this vision and mission, priority programs were determined and plans were drawn to organize activities in support of the PAPL I's recommendations.<sup>16</sup>

Seen as a whole, PAPL I admittedly was short of being a diocesan synod and of being a pastoral council that it hardly attracted notice from the other dioceses in the region and elsewhere. Held without much publicity and funfare, not many even in the mother

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<sup>16</sup> See Quinquennial Report, January 1, 1990 to December 31, 1994, p. 2-3; PLDFI, "A Call to Faith and Conversion towards the Third Millenium", in *Souvenir Program, 7<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Prelature of Libmanan, 1990-1997*.

diocese, where it was being held, even knew it was taking place as indeed it happened very quietly. But it was no less a very significant event in the life of the Prelature. What was particularly remarkable was that the Pastoral Assembly did take place barely two years and a half after the Prelature separated from the Archdiocese. For a very young local Church, this was definitely a major breakthrough.

That the PAPL I's proceedings turned out to be such a success was perhaps beyond anyone's expectation, given the lack of experience of nearly every participant in the assembly, perhaps including the Bishop-Prelate himself. But its fruitfulness was due to the enthusiasm of the participants to generate concrete results, and no doubt owing to the assistance provided by the *Center for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia* (CDHRRA) in the discussions, especially in the framing and conduct of the evaluative process.

### **The Aftermath of the Pastoral Assembly and the First Pastoral Visitation**

The enthusiasm to get down to work immediately after the assembly may have been palpable enough, but it dawned on everyone that owing to the Prelature's lack of resources, not the least its human resources, assistance had to be further sought elsewhere. Various groups and institutions readily responded, such as the *Luzon Secretariat for Social Action* (LUSSA), the *Colegio de Santa Isabel* (CSI now *Universidad de Santa Isabel*), the *Pag-asang Bikolnon Foundation, Inc.* and the *Ateneo de Naga Social Science Research Center* (AdNSSRC). Through the help of these groups, the vision-mission of the Prelature was even further clarified, paving the way towards the formulation of concrete plans for action aimed at making more concrete the gains achieved during the Pastoral Assembly.

But first, the task at hand was to make people in the parishes aware that every pastoral initiative in the Prelature was going to be undertaken in view of its vision-mission. This required of course that they fully understand what this vision-mission was all about. To carry on this task and to design a working structure for the purpose of implementing PAPL I's recommendations, Bishop Arellano created on September 16, 1992 an *ad hoc* committee which was called the *Prelature Core Group* (PCG) composed of himself, five priests and a lay leader who had direct contact with the NGOs.

To assist the PCG in the actual work in the individual parishes, the *Vicarial Core Groups* (VCG), composed of the priests in the respective vicariates under the leadership of the Vicar Forane, two lay leaders from each parish and a researcher, were also created. Its particular task was to help the parishes plan their own pastoral programs. In the parish level, the *Parish Core Group* (PaCG), composed of the parish priest and lay leaders that represented the mandated religious organizations and clustered *barangays*, was also organized. Its task, on the other hand, was to serve as the working staff of the parish in the actual implementation of the pastoral programs.

As if all these working structures were not enough, Bishop Arellano organized yet another body, the *Prelature of Libmanan Pastoral and Developmental Coordinating Council*

(PLPDCC), again composed of himself, the Vicar General, the Financial Administrator, the Executive Director of the *Prelature of Libmanan Development Foundation, Inc.* (PLDFI), two associate directors and two lay persons representing the Council of the Laity and the Youth. The PLPDCC was to act as a consultative body in the implementation of all pastoral and developmental programs in the Prelature. Whereas the PLDFI, just mentioned, was meant to serve as the actual implementing service arm, in other words, the program management and implementation structure, of the pastoral and developmental concerns of the Prelature. More will be said about the PLDFI further below.

All these having been organized, the next step was to get down to actual field work in the parishes. From February 25 to March 17, 1993, at the Betania Retreat House (Iriga City), a series of Parish Pastoral Assemblies,<sup>17</sup> participated in by the parish priest and twenty lay delegates each parish, took place (i.e., by vicariate). The primary aim of the such assemblies was to provide all parishes the opportunity to formulate their own vision-mission statements, without of course straying away from the vision-mission of the Prelature as a whole.

The parish assemblies also became the occasion for the lay faithful to deepen their understanding and grasp of the PCP II documents and decrees. More relevantly, the parish assemblies opened up the space for the lay faithful to analyze the situation in their parishes and pinpoint both positive and negative developments therein. Consequently, the parish pastoral assemblies were able to elicit from the lay faithful their pledge of commitment to get actively involved in the life and mission of their parishes. Furthermore, parish leaders, who were willing to offer their services to the parishes and extend help to parish priests, were identified. A plan was subsequently drawn to provide these leaders continuing formation.

Thereafter, as a concrete result of the pastoral assemblies, a *participative action research* was conducted that same year (1993), the main objective of which was to obtain facts and figures regarding the religious, socio-economic and cultural profile of the whole Prelature. This, and the actual data gathering, were done through what was called the "*focused group discussion*". Furthermore, skills training programs were drawn, research plans designed and thrusts and goals articulated within a three-year time frame, all this with the help of the Ateneo de Naga SSRC. In the end, the intent of all these activities, was to provide basis for the formulation and implementation of a five-year *Comprehensive Pastoral Development Program* (CPDP) in the Prelature.

With the Prelature's situation profile made available, a seminar on *Pastoral Management and Planning* was conducted in January 1994. The seminar enabled its participants, mainly parish representatives, to determine which action program needed to be implemented in the parishes in the order of priority. More importantly, it was on this occasion that three concepts, crucial in integrating what used to be a fragmented and partial understanding of the pastoral programs and the direction that so far the

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<sup>17</sup> The holding of Parish Assemblies was effected through a Circular Letter issued and addressed by Bishop Prospero Arellano to all priests of the Prelature, dated February 1, 1993.



Prelature has taken, were identified, namely: a) *Renewed Integral Evangelization* (RIE); b) *Renewed Integral Social Ministry and Ecology* (RISME); and c) *Agents of Renewal* (AR) or *Renewed Agents of Change* (RAC). It was now up to the Second Pastoral Assembly of Libmanan (PAPL II), as will be seen later, to take up and use these concepts to form the basis of what would become the CPDP.

Finally, still in view of PAPL I's recommendations, and to be able to harness the Prelature's human resources, several training seminars, be these on community organization or research skills training, were offered to various groups. One such seminar was held on April 15-May 20, 1993 and attended by the seminarians of the Prelature, the "*Katurugangan nin mga Limaneñong Seminarista*" (KALIS). The purpose of the gathering was to evaluate the situation in the parishes, focusing on all religious organizations and movements in terms of their nature, composition, activities and relevance to the parish community.

Another training-seminar was held on August 24-28, 1993, facilitated by the Luzon Secretariat of the *Basic Christian Communities – Community Organizing* (BCC-CO) and given to five members of the Parish Core Group of each parish to make initial plans for the formation of the *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* (SKK), so-called because they were envisioned to become small or basic faith communities within the parish. A third seminar was held on December 27-29, 1993, and participated in by forty-eight youth representatives in view of formulating the vision-mission of the Youth Ministry itself in the light of the vision-mission of the Prelature and of the PCP II teachings.

Indeed, PAPL I was no mean gathering, as it sparked a series of events that clearly veered life in the Prelature towards growth and gave the Prelature a sense of being Church. Quite fittingly, culminating all these events as it were, Bishop Arellano made a pastoral visit of all the parishes in the Prelature beginning February 7 and further on to March 13, 1994. Apart from the usual canonical objectives of a pastoral visit, Bishop Arellano wanted to see if the parishes were moving along the direction set forth by the Pastoral Assembly and if a pastoral program was in place and being implemented in every parish.

But there was more to the pastoral visit than just to serve as a check to the progress the parishes were making in the implementation of their pastoral programs. The bishop's visits were also meant to provide him data for his quinquennial report, which he was going to submit to the Holy See on the occasion of his *ad limina* visit during the early part of 1995.

For the priests and the lay faithful, the bishop's visits were something else. It made the bishop's presence in the Prelature more tangible and personal. These visits signified for them the bishop's availability and demonstrated his concern not only for the Prelature as a whole but for the individual parishes as well. This was the first time, indeed, since taking canonical possession of the Prelature that Bishop Arellano, in an official capacity, immersed himself in the local situation in a way still unparalleled before. Quite expectedly, Bishop Arellano saw much more than what he already did in his previous cursory visits during parish fiestas and while occasionally administering confirmation

therein. He discovered that some parishes were too large to be administered by just one parish priest. This time, then, he became even more resolute in creating new parishes by subdividing bigger ones, if only to make them smaller in size and hence a lot easier to administer and manage.

### **The Creation of New Parishes**

Two months after Bishop Arellano winded up his first pastoral visitation of the parishes, on May 10 1994, he created a new parish in San Antonio, Milaor, the St. Anthony of Padua Parish, entrusting its administration to the priests of the *Society of Our Lady of the Trinity* (SOLT).

The new parish absorbed some of the villages that used to be under the jurisdiction of the mother parish, St. Joseph Parish in Milaor, and some villages in the neighboring Parish of Sts. Philip and James in Minalabac. The thought of entrusting the new parish to the Society of Our Lady of the Trinity was occasioned by the decision of the Superiors of the Society to set up its own Formation House in San Antonio, this village being just a ride away from the Holy Rosary Major and Minor Seminaries in Naga City, where their seminarians were being sent for their theological and philosophical studies. With priests still scarce in the Prelature, it was most practical to seek the help of the Society in running the new parish. The coming of the SOLT into the village of San Antonio proved to be providential as it was the presence of their religious community that facilitated much the opening of the new parish.

Two years thereafter, in 1996, another new parish was created, this time in the coastal area of the municipality of Minalabac, Camarines Sur, particularly in the village of Salinggogon. The new parish was named after its patroness, Our Lady of Salvation. Its jurisdiction extended to villages that belong to three adjoining municipalaities, namely, those of Minalabac itself and those of Milaor and San Fernando. The basic consideration for the creation of the new parish was the sheer population size of these three municipalities. Being one-parish towns, Minalabac and San Fernando were particularly huge. Moreover, the villages covered by the new parish, which were mostly coastal, were largely remotely inaccessible to their mother parishes, not only because of sheer distance but also because of the poor road conditions which made travel terribly unbearable if not almost impossible. Given the task of organizing the new parish was a young priest then, *Ruben Buena*.

It is worthy to note that in these two previous attempts to create new parishes, there was hardly anything that the Prelature could offer in terms of financial assistance. Always lacking in resources, the bishop had no choice but to leave the daunting task of constructing the Church edifice and the parish rectory to the ingenuity of the Parish Priests assigned to these places. No doubt, it was just out of courage, sheer obedience and love for the Church that these parish priests readily accepted such responsibility.

The lack of resources then was never an obstacle in opening new parishes. The main motivation in pursuing the expansion of parishes has always been the desire to bring the

Church closer to the people, even if this might mean sacrifice on the part of the parish priest. Thus, in 1998, another new parish was born out of some villages from the municipalities in Lupi and Ragay. Banga Caves in Ragay was chosen as the seat of the new parish, where the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Salvation, was also enshrined as patroness. This time, the task of administering the new parish fell on *Marcos Quesada*.

Following a second round of pastoral visitation, Bishop Arellano continued to create new parishes in spite all odds. In the later part of 2000 and in the early part of 2001, two more parishes in the municipality of Libmanan were created. One, in the coastal village of Bâhao, the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes (2000), and the other, in Mambulo, along the national highway, the Parish of St. Anthony of Padua (2001). These two new parishes were an addition to the 3 already existing parishes in Libmanan, absorbing some more villages of the 74 that comprise the whole municipality. These two additions brought the number of parishes in the Prelature by the year 2001 to 21, that is, an addition of 5 parishes, 10 years after Libmanan was created as a Prelature.

## **PAPL II: A Defining Moment**

Such must have been the determination of Bishop Arellano to follow up the implementation of the recommendations of the First Pastoral Assembly of 1992, that barely one year and a half thereafter, on March 15-18, 1994, he convened once again the *Second Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan* (PAPL II).

The point of departure for the PAPL II discussions was a review as it were of the situation of the Prelature “then and now” (situationer). This was an essential step in moving the discussions to the presentation of the general framework and orientational principles that would be followed in the assembly and meant to serve as guide in the workshop sessions that dwelt on three main agenda, namely, a) *Renewed Integral Evangelization* (RIE), b) *Renewed Integral Social Ministry and Ecology* (RISME), and c) *Renewed Agents of Change* (RAC). Along these three main agenda and based on the situationer and orientational principles, the assembly participants produced 109 recommendations that were subsequently promulgated into decrees by the bishop at the conclusion of the assembly on March 18, 1994.<sup>18</sup>

Such decrees were formulated precisely according to the three main headings taken up during the discussions just mentioned. Each of these headings in turn had its own thematic content. For instance, the first heading (*Renewed Integral Evangelization*), covered such specific themes as *worship, formation-education* and *spirituality*, whereas the second heading (*Renewed Integral Social Ministry and Ecology*) covered the area of social action apostolate and ecology, and finally, the decrees under the third heading (*Renewed Agents of Change*) pertained to the general theme of *community of disciples* and the specific themes of the *clergy, the religious* and the *laity*. On the other hand, the decrees under each of these themes were classified into either *orientational* or *operational* decrees, the

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<sup>18</sup> See “Decrees, Second Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan”, in *Quinquennial Report of the Prelature of Libmanan, March 19, 1990 to December 31, 1994*, p. 63-78.

difference being that the former referred to those that serve as theological basis of pastoral initiatives consistent with Church laws and diocesan norms, whereas the latter referred to those concerned with how the Prelature might decide and plan for its ministry.

Again, though short of being a diocesan synod, PAPL II proved to be another significant breakthrough in the history of the Prelature. Its decrees paved the way for the formulation of the five-year *Comprehensive Pastoral Development Program* (CPDP) in June of 1994.<sup>19</sup> Once again, the CPDP reflected the eleven themes covered by the three general headings (which may now be conveniently called *major thematic programs* of the CPDP) under which the various decrees of PAPL II were listed down, namely, the *Renewed Integral Evangelization* (RIE), the *Renewed Integral Social Ministry and Ecology* (RISME), and the *Renewed Agents of Change* (RAC).

As can be gleaned from these decrees, it was the consensus of the assembly participants that the Prelature must always project the image of a *Renewed Church* in its mission, and that all efforts in this Renewed Church to provide service to the people, especially the poor, should be undertaken within the ambit of these three major thematic programs. Most significantly, the assembly participants expressed the desire of having as end product of all these efforts and the implementation of these three major programs, the formation of small Christian communities in all the parishes of the Prelature, what was going to be called henceforth as the *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* (SKK).<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the main contribution of PAPL II was not only the fact that it provided the basis for the formulation of the CPDP in general, but more so for establishing the ground and rationale for adopting as a major pastoral strategy the building of small Christian communities, the SKKs, in all parishes of the Prelature. From now on, slowly and gradually, the SKK shall give “face” to the Church in the Prelature. From now on, the SKK shall give flesh to the identity of a “*Renewed Church*” that the Prelature had always been aspiring to become. At last, the “*Community of Disciples*” and the “*Church of the Poor*” which PCP II had so frequently talked about, were to find concrete expression in the SKK. To such great measure then, PAPL II had become a *defining moment* in the life of the Prelature of Libmanan as a local Church.

### **The Emergence and Growth of the SKK**

Up until then, however, everything was only on paper and things looked good only insofar as this blueprint as it were was concerned. The harder part, however, of the whole plan was yet to be accomplished, that is, the implementation of the five-year Comprehensive Pastoral Development Program. The real challenge now was how to make the SKK a living reality. Things had to start somehow, somewhere.

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<sup>19</sup> The whole process of formulating the CPDP was facilitated by the *Pag-asang Bikolnon Foundation, Inc.* and the PLDFI.

<sup>20</sup> PAPL II Decrees, Article #26.

Emboldened by the technical assistance provided by the *Asian Social Institute* (ASI) through trainings and seminars, *Michael de la Rosa*, then Parish Priest of St. Bernardine of Sienna Parish in Cabusao, made the first bold step. The crucial date for this audacious effort was December 1, 1999, the day De la Rosa started doing what everybody at that time thought was not just possible. He had options on how to go about forming small Christian communities. As is the usual strategy in many places, he could immediately give formation seminars, according to the idea that if people imbibe the proper values through these seminars, it would be a lot easier to organize them.

Or, he could start organizing them around traditional activities and events that could keep them together every month during the whole year, and only then introduce into these gatherings values formation, evangelization and catechesis. The idea was to make use of these activities to gather people, because having become traditional in themselves in the sense that these were activities that people engage in year in and year out, they render people already captive as it were, making them easier to organize later in more systematic fashion. Examples of these traditional activities were the chanting of the "*pasion*" during lent and the Holy Week, the "*Flores de Mayo*" and the "*Santacruzán*" in May, the *Penafrancia* Celebration in August and September, the Block Rosary in October, and the "*Aguinaldo*" masses in December.

De la Rosa chose this second strategy, and contrary perhaps even to his own expectations, people started gravitating around these monthly activities until such time that he was able to eventually form them into smaller communities. He grouped together families into several "clusters" and chose cluster leaders who were given the responsibility of coordinating their group's activities.

Easy as all this may sound to be, it required utmost commitment, hard work and dedication on the part of the parish priest. For one thing, he had to do house to house visitation in the evenings for that was the only time when people were free from their work. Literally, he had to accompany the cluster leaders every step of the way, and had to make himself available for peoples' recurring needs. De la Rosa's efforts paid off. After diligent accompaniment, smaller communities of families began to shape up in the various villages in his parish, and these communities became more and more involved in the life of the parish.

All of these, however, was not left simply to experience and to a hit-or-miss strategy. De la Rosa had to follow the scheme outlined in the CPDP in order to make things going. The SKKs were to be composed of six to eight families in relatively contiguous locations and to be established through a systematic process which consisted of community integration, core group-building, participatory investigation and planning, setting-up of structures or group-formalization, mobilization and evaluation - and all these Basic Christian Community-Community Organizing (BCC-CO) procedural steps were to be carried out with the help of pastoral workers acting as community organizers.

The starting point, however, in SKK-building remained to be the individual himself. No community can ever be organized without conversion at the level of the individual person. Thus, it was a prerequisite that each prospective member of the community

undergo four phases or stages of development: the call, conversion, communion and commissioning. In the end, each individual member would have to be prepared to get committed to whatever concrete interventions, apostolates and projects that the SKK might be called to get involved in, in the long term, in response to a particular need in the community.

As in any community, a certain degree of order had to be maintained within the SKK. Roles and responsibilities had to be clearly delineated and formal structures had to be established to ensure smooth flow in the implementation of pastoral programs and in the management of cooperative livelihood projects of the SKK.

Having followed this systematic approach, De la Rosa may have been successful in Cabusao, but many of his fellow priests, perhaps including the bishop himself, had doubts if the Cabusao experience could be duplicated in the other parishes of the Prelature. For one thing, the strategy may have worked in Cabusao, because the parish here was rather small and manageable. There were nagging fears that the same strategy might not just work if it were to be implemented in larger parishes.

Such skepticism, however, was proven wrong when *Camilo Palma* took over, as Parish Priest, the administration of St. James Cathedral Parish in Libmanan. There was no question about the size of St. James Parish because everybody knew that it was such a big parish. This, however, did not deter Palma from organizing here the SKK. With the help of De la Rosa in neighboring Cabusao, Palma's initiatives in Libmanan were rewarded as the SKK spread out in the confines of his parish, from village to village.

To further test the workability of De la Rosa's strategy, he was assigned by the bishop to Lupi, in the Parish of St. Peter Baptist. Lupi was different from both Cabusao and Libmanan in that it had a different terrain, many of its villages being situated in mountainous areas of the parish's jurisdiction. That meant that the main problem here would be inaccessibility as there were very few roads, if nothing at all, that connected these villages to the parish's center of pastoral activities. And if there were any roads at all, these were in such poor state that rendered transportation extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible. Because of this, doubts lingered once again if organizing the SKK in the parish was feasible at all. But with such determination and conviction, De la Rosa proved to everyone that such fears were unfounded. He went about forming small Christian communities in and around his parish, and the results were there for everyone to see.

The priests of the prelature must have learned their lesson from this experience, however tentative and experimental it appeared to be, as each one of them eventually had a change of heart. The lesson was loud and clear. If only they would commit themselves with such enthusiasm and zeal to such pastoral undertaking as organizing small Christian communities in their parishes, then there was really nothing that proved to be insurmountable. Such conversion in the clergy's perspective marked the beginning of the phenomenal growth of the SKK in the Prelature. By 2007, 3,765 clusters of families have been formed in various parishes, and their number continues to rise to this day. What is even more phenomenal is that these communities have grown

spontaneously from the local situation in such a way that one can truly say that these communities flourished and continue to do so not on a model that has been borrowed or imported from elsewhere, but rather as one that is truly peculiar to the Prelature's *Sitz-im-Leben*.

### **A Renewed Integral Social Ministry: The PLDFI**

Not to be overlooked in all this development is that part of the success of the SKK Program was due to the contribution of the *Prelature of Libmanan Development Foundation, Inc.* (PLDFI), which provided the program its social action component. The SKK Program as it evolved in the Prelature was not just all about spiritual formation. It was also about empowering people to be able to support themselves, precisely in the context of community.

Actually, the forerunner of the PLDFI was the Parish Social Action Center of Libmanan (PSACL) which was organized under the Social Action Center of Caceres. Consequent to the separation of the Prelature of Libmanan from the Archdiocese of Caceres in 1990, PSACL also became independent and was registered at the Social Exchange Commission (SEC), taking the name *Libmanan Social Action Foundation, Inc.* (LISAFI). *Edgar Pan* was appointed as its first director. For two years, the LISAFI took care of the Social Action Apostolate of the Prelature.

The holding of PAPL I in September 1992 brought about some structural changes in the Social Action Program of the Prelature. In accordance with the recommendations of PAPL I, Bishop Arellano created the *Prelature of Libmanan Development Office* (PLPDO) to serve as the Prelature's socio-pastoral arm. On October 1, 1993, the PLPDO was registered at the SEC and took the name of PLDFI, with *Felix Vistal* as its first full-time director.

Acquiring such legal personality, the PLDFI functioned as facilitator in meetings and planning sessions the intent of which was to find means and ways to realize the vision-mission of the Prelature. It thereby also acted as the service arm of the Prelature in its pastoral and developmental concerns, even to the point of assisting the WESTY commissions in their respective tasks and functions.

The tasks of the PLDFI have become wide-ranging, absorbing, in particular, much of the social action component of the Prelature's pastoral agenda. Such being the case, LISAFI became superfluous, inevitably paving the way for it to be merged with the PLDFI. Thus, from 1993 onwards, the PLDFI has taken over the Prelature's social action apostolate and all its developmental projects and programs.

As the idea of building small Christian communities started to emerge as a pastoral option, the PLDFI integrated in the implementation of its projects a component involving community organization particularly as this was seen as an indispensable step towards building BECs.

Contrary to expectations, however, building BECs by following this approach proved to be ineffective and slow. Soon enough, both the clergy and lay leaders realized that building BECs was not just a question of community organizing. If BECs were to be a new way of being Church, then this required a “way of life” that is the product of renewal and conversion. That means renewal in the sacramental and liturgical life of the local Church, radical change in the clergy’s priorities and lifestyle, more vigor in the lay’s participation in the life of the Church and in their sense of belongingness, reform in institutional structures and in the whole formation program of the local Church.

This negative assessment put a halt to the momentum otherwise already gained by the PLDFI in its projects and programs. So as not to waste past efforts, the implementation of projects already initiated had to be completed and finished and communities that have already been organized had to be continuously sustained. Moreover, PLDFI had to freeze proposing projects, especially those that were simply developmental in nature.

This turn of events, however, proved to be only a temporary setback. That PLDFI’s initial approach generated but only a few results provided the opportunity for it to more vigorously commit itself to its own vision and mission, particularly in being “*an empowered Christian Socio-Pastoral Foundation, pursuing total human development through the BEC and to serve as a Church-based socio-developmental institution concerned with promoting justice, peace, morality, ecology and other issues in accordance with the Social Teachings of the Church*”.<sup>21</sup>

Having adopted this vision-mission, conceptualized during the deliberations of PAPL II, the PLDFI played a major role in the implementation of the CPDP’s program of *Renewed Integral Social Ministry and Ecology* (RISME). More must be said about this program at this point because it was through this program that the PLDFI particularly extended its assistance in the development projects of the SKK. RISME had four component programs: a) infrastructure and temporalities program, b) enterprise development and assistance program, c) special concerns program, d) networking program, and e) institutional and resource development program. With the assistance of the PLDFI, the Development Office of the *Infrastructure and Temporalities Program* was enabled to manage the initial operations of training and formation centers in the Prelature. Again, with the help of the PLDFI, assistance was extended to the SKKs, through the *Enterprise Development and Assistance Program*, in instituting *barangay* cooperatives, offering technical, managerial, marketing and financial support to SKKs in the *barangays* and in the parish. The SKKs had also benefited from the *Special Concerns Program*, particularly under its *Community-Based Health* (CBH) and *Disaster Preparedness/Management* (DPM) projects that are in fact better sustained in the context of organized communities. The PLDFI, through the *Networking Program* was also instrumental in popularizing the pastoral thrusts of the Prelature for the purpose of generating support from various linkages and different sectors of society. Finally, the *Institutional and Resource Development Program* which called for the continuous process of staff training and development improved and strengthened the capability of the PLDFI to perform its functions effectively and efficiently.

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<sup>21</sup> PAPL II Decrees, Article # 71.



Not only was the PLDFI involved in these programs. Spurred further on by the recommendations of PAPL III in 2000, about which more will be said below, PLDFI provided assistance in the building itself of small Christian communities (SKKs), particularly building upon the success of the Cabusao experience. This time the results were encouraging as priests, lay leaders, parishes, organizations and existing communities got more involved in the whole process. By 2008, 98% of the Prelature's parishes have been reorganized into SKK clusters, whose members regularly meet and undergo formation, and whose pastoral workers and cluster leaders are constantly trained and formed. What guarantees the success of the present set up is that the priests are the ones facilitating, let alone undergoing, formation themselves.

While much of the work of organizing and formation have been accomplished, the whole process of the BEC building has moved on to the challenge and work of development, and quite naturally the PLDFI was at hand to facilitate this movement and transition. Having established linkages with other government and private or non-government agencies that supported its projects and activities, the PLDFI has been placed in a much better position to assume this function always in accordance with the Prelature's commitment to a "*Renewed Integral Social Ministry*". These linkages have been multifarious. To name but a few, these included the *Department of Health (DOH)*, the *Catholic Relief Services (CRS)*, the *Center for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (CENDHRRA)*, the *Pag-asang Bicolnon Foundation, Inc. (PAGBIKOL)*, the *Ateneo de Naga Social Science Research Center (AdN SSRC)*, the *Luzon Secretariat for Social Action (LUSSA)*, the *Christian Catholic Child Welfare Association (CCWA)*, the *National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA)*, and such foreign institutions as *Germany's Missio and Kirche in Not*, the *Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*, and *Spain's Manos Unidas*.

Indeed, given its connections, the PLDFI has been able to undertake in the past such developmental projects as the *Partnership for Community Health Development Program* and the *Integrated Nutrition and Development Program* (in cooperation particularly with the DOH), the *Barangay Comprehensive Development Program*, *Livelihood Recovery for Typhoon Victims*, etc. Concurrently, the PLDFI's projects have been expanded to include various areas of concern such as education and formation, sustainable agriculture, enterprise development, health and nutrition program, disaster management program, ecology and environment, and even good governance.

Realizing the need to help curb corruption in all levels and spheres of life, the PLDFI actively participates in various anti-corruption initiatives such as the *Internal Revenue Allotment Watch (IRAW)* and the *Priority Development Assistance Fund Watch (PDAFW)*, to increase people's participation in monitoring the utilization of the 20% development fund and the congressman's pork barrel respectively. Aside from this, the PLDFI has also gone into *Medicine Monitoring of Public Hospitals*.

As far as participation in public life is concerned and to help increase the public's consciousness on good governance, the PLDFI has also been active in promoting the activities of the PPCRV such as voters' education, organizing political fora, election

watch and quick count. It has also participated in political reform consultations, obtained membership in Local Development Councils and conducted various educational fora to motivate BEC members in taking up action to combat corruption.

More recently, the PLDFI provided assistance to Del Gallego parishioners to set up their own Agricultural Program called “Gulayan sa Simbahan” aimed at ensuring the SKK’s self-sufficiency in vegetable (food) production. In the area of environmental stewardship and protection, the PLDFI has taken the lead in mangrove reforestation of San Miguel Bay and the Ragay Gulf coastal areas, and in the riverbank protection and soil erosion prevention of the Bicol River, particularly that portion spanning the town of Libmanan. Finally, it has served as lead convenor in organizing the Camarines Sur Summit on Climate Change to heighten the Bicolanos’ awareness of this environmental problem which in turn could prompt them to find means in which they might be able to contribute towards finding a solution to the problem.

Looking at its projects and its accomplishments in particular, the PLDFI has in many ways clearly fulfilled its mission and has thereby moved towards the realization of its vision. Under its current Director, *Granwel Pitapit*, it has become the Prelature’s most prolific body, particularly in the services it provides to the SKKs now thriving and flourishing in the Prelature precisely because of its assistance.

### **1994-2000: Years of Rigorous Implementation**

Just as the organization of the SKK was being initially tested in Cabusao, other pastoral initiatives have also been launched in accordance with the CPDP and the PAPL II decrees. Following the program for *Renewed Agents of Change* (RAC), several training seminars were organized in the Prelature, precisely to augment and strengthen the present pool of human resources among the clergy and the laity and in making them truly faith-inspired Church workers, who are both effective and efficient in the performance of their pastoral duties and responsibilities. Also part of the program, and not to be taken for granted, were efforts to improve the mode of information-dissemination and data-management through the development of the media, such that pastoral and Church-related information are better understood when they reach the level of the majority of the faithful.

This operational strategy was to find concrete expression in two component programs. First, was the *Youth and Catechetical Development Program* which in the first place called for the organization of *Parish Formators’ Teams* (composed mainly of lay leaders, formators, trainers, and volunteer catechists), for the sake of human resource development. Second, was the *Priests and Religious Formation Program* aimed at providing the priests and religious continued education and formation. Not only was this intended to update their knowledge and skills, it was also to provide them the opportunity the bond and fellowship among themselves.

One of the first of formation seminars endendered by the RAC Program took place between March 1994 and March 1996. Facilitated by the PLDFI, and in view of building

SKKs in the parishes, participants to this series of formation seminars were 62 Community Organizing Volunteers coming from 14 pilot barangays of the South, Central and North Districts. Fruit of this effort was that the number of SKK clusters that were organized reached 61 in 1994. This number has climbed to 91, this time coming from 19 pilot barangays, between the period of December 1995 and April 1996. From April 1996 to September 1997, the second series of formation seminars took place, with the area of SKK-building expanding to new pilot barangays in more towns and parishes.

Not everything though was confined to SKK-building. In the meantime, within the same period, seminars and training programs on Christian and Community Leadership were also conducted in all the vicariates of the Prelature and attended by parish representatives in these places. The intent was to enable these representatives to be of help to the parish priests in the implementation of the CPDP and in the realization of the vision and mission in their respective parishes.

Going down to the level of the parish, PAPL II called on all the different religious organizations in every parish also to be reorganized. This was done in the hope of renewing and strengthening the commitment of these organizations in their apostolates and in their mandate to serve the parish. The Parish Pastoral Councils were also similarly reorganized, all for the purpose of eliciting from these groups the same dedication and commitment required in the implementation of parish pastoral programs.

Certain groups in the Prelature with specific apostolates and responsibilities also received particular attention. These included seminarians, catechists, extraordinary lay ministers, the youth, etc. All these groups had to undergo formation relative to the pastoral programs both of the Prelature as a whole and those of the individual parishes. All along, the PLDFI was instrumental in following up various programs that offered formation and training to these various groups.

Everything might appear up until this point to be smooth sailing. But this perception was far from the truth. The process of implementing SKK-building as a major pastoral strategy was not without serious problems and obstacles. First of all, notwithstanding modest SKK-expansion, only few parishes had actually started to implement the CPDP and its corresponding enabling programs. For one thing, the building of SKKs in the parishes was rather slow and limited as it did not have the full support of many parish priests who had doubts as regards the SKK's workability. It should be recalled that reaction to the success of SKK-building in Cabusao and Libmanan was not that positive as this was met with so much skepticism.

It was on account of this negative development that Bishop Arellano invited the *Asian Social Institute* (ASI) in 1998 to assist the Prelature in addressing the difficulties in implementing the CPDP and, in particular, in making the SKK truly an expression of the vision of the Prelature to become a renewed Church. ASI dutifully came to the rescue, making as its first recommendation the revision of the organizational structure of the Prelature and the streamlining of the programs and services of the PLDFI.

There were two related reasons for this move. First, the programs and activities in the implementation of building SKKs were not really coordinated. For one thing, information regarding SKK, and CPDP for that matter, was not fully disseminated within the whole Prelature. This lack of communication only proved that the organizational structure of the Prelature was defective so as to require revision. In other words, there was need for a prelature-wide reorganization. Thus, not only was the PLPDCC (*Prelature of Libmanan Pastoral and Developmental Coordinating Council*) replaced by the PCC (*Programs Coordinating Council*), a Prelature Finance Council was also created, the different commissions restructured, and the parishes grouped no longer into vicariates but rather into three districts (North, Central and South), each one under the leadership of an *Episcopal Vicar*. More about this reorganization will be said below.

Second, and a bit connected to the first problem of defective, if not faulty, organizational set-up, it was the PLDFI that was tasked to play the primary role in designing, planning and implementing the SKK "*Program*". Since by its very nature, the PLDFI was social-action-oriented, the SKK has also assumed this sort of orientation. It may not be surprising then to see most of the SKKs taking the form of cooperatives and engaged mostly in health and livelihood programs and not necessarily the *renewed communities* that they were called to become.

It was not difficult to see further that apart from these foregoing problems, part of the skepticism that greeted the initial SKK experience in Cabusao and Libmanan that stalled the growth of SKK-building in the other parishes, was that the parish priests themselves did not have a clear idea of what the SKK was really all about. Many of them thought that SKK-building was simply a thrust or pastoral direction, or better still just a "*program*" as it was in fact called as such – the "*SKK Program*" – thus, one that begins and ends, rather than a continuous if not never ending process. A limited understanding such as this meant that the SKK was subject to constant change depending on the changing situations currently prevailing in the local Church.

Finally, all these problems were aggravated by the perennial lack of funds, though there was constant, if not inevitable, need for them. Financial resources were simply very meager and hardly able to support the activities in the whole process of SKK-building.

All these, however, were no reason to despair. Bishop Arellano was resolute in his determination to pursue the pastoral strategy the Prelature has thus far already worked so hard for. On November 6, 1998, he and the clergy formally re-launched the implementation of SKK-building, encouraging all parishes to adopt the SKK program and formation.<sup>22</sup> This time, the SKK implementation would no longer be confined to pilot parishes and *barangays* but would cover the whole of the Prelature of Libmanan.

With the help of ASI, there followed a series of trainings for SKK animators to support the momentum created by this re-launching. On January 31 – February 4, 1999, one such

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<sup>22</sup> R. Laureles, "Diocesan Accompaniment: The Prelature of Libmanan Experience", in *Kapwaan* (2004), p. 103.

training was held and participated in by no less than the bishop himself, the parish priests, parochial vicars and 2 parish workers from each parish who were to get involved in SKK formation in their respective parishes. Similarly, on February 22-27, 1999, the *Project Development Seminar* was given by ASI once again to the bishop, all priests of the Prelature and 2 lay leaders for the purpose of formulating project proposals for SKK-building in all 19 parishes in the Prelature.

On July 5-9, 1999, ASI conducted the *Strategic Planning Workshop* for both the PLDFI and the newly created *Programs Coordinating Council (PCC)* under its Director, *Michael de la Rosa*. De la Rosa's appointment proved to be propitious as, it will be recalled, it was he who was to take the first initiative to build SKKs in the Prelature, particularly in Cabusao where he was at one time assigned as pastor. Participating in this workshop were the PLDFI Staff, the Vicar General, the Episcopal Vicars, representatives of the parish priests, and not to be counted out, the bishop himself. In this workshop, the strategic plan for SKK-building was finalized and the working relations among the PLDFI, the PCC and the parishes in terms of program implementation was clearly delineated so that the distinct contributions of each of these partners so to speak are not unnecessarily duplicated, preventing each contribution from being rendered superfluous in that context.

But more must now be said about the PCC. This particular body was actually created as the result of the revision of the organizational structure, to replace what used to be the *Prelature of Libmanan Pastoral and Developmental Coordinating Council (PLPDCC)*.<sup>23</sup> The common perception was that this Council was rather ineffective in carrying out its tasks since its role was not really clear to begin with. Its replacement by the PCC<sup>24</sup> was meant to correct this defect. Like the PLPDCC, the PCC was to act as a consultative body in the implementation of the SKK Program, but unlike its predecessor, it was meant to function to ensure that all existing programs in the Prelature are well integrated and made to fit within the SKK system.

Having become part of the PCC, the different Commission Heads also had to undergo a planning workshop organized by the ASI on December 6-9, 1999, in order to assist them to prepare their own plan and proposal for a support system to the SKK.

Given all these preparatory events, everything was set for the holding of the Second Parish Pastoral Assemblies (PPA II) which began in February 2000 and continued on to March 2000. The purpose of these assemblies was to give key

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<sup>23</sup> The PLPDCC was composed of the Bishop, the Vicar General, the Financial Administrator, the Executive Director of the PLDFI, 2 Associate Directors, and 2 lay leaders representing the Council of the Laity and the Youth. See p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> The composition of the PCC slightly differed from that of the PLPDCC to include: the Vicar General, an Executive Secretary, Executive Director of the PLDFI, Financial Administrator, Episcopal Vicars and the Commission Heads.

leaders in the parishes the proper orientation on the SKK Program and when filtered down into the parish setting, it was hoped that this would widen the parishioners' understanding that the SKK was the heart of the vision-mission not only of the Prelature as a whole but that of the individual parishes as well. Apart from this SKK interest, the parish assemblies also came up with two other innovative plans, namely, an alternative financial system that would eventually replace the *arancel system*, and the recruitment of parish lay leaders and workers, providing them in the process continuing leadership skills training and formation.

The holding of these parish assemblies was rather opportune as they took place just before the Prelature was to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its Canonical Erection on March 19, 2000. Meanwhile, as all the events leading up to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration were unfolding, Bishop Arellano made his second round of pastoral visitation of all the parishes, this time numbering 20, from January to February 2000. As in the past, the experience would eventually give the bishop another push for the creation of more parishes in the years to come.

### **PAPL III: Renewing the Church in the Third Millennium**

Much has happened then since PAPL II. Quite fittingly, within the celebration of the Great Jubilee Year of 2000, on the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the Prelature's existence, and after five years since the implementation of the CPDP, on September 4-7, 2000, Bishop Arellano convened another pastoral assembly, the PAPL III. The theme of the convocation was nothing but truly appropriate: "*Basic Ecclesial Communities: Life and Hope for a Renewed Church in the New Millennium*". Prior to the actual convocation, consultation was made on several points, like the alternative financial system and the scenario in the parish if it were to be an SKK-oriented parish.<sup>25</sup> But given the time-frame within which the CPDP was designed to be implemented, it was most logical that the assembly's discussions had for their starting point the evaluation of the CPDP's implementation, to see if progress has been made in realizing its goals and pastoral objectives. Once again, the bishop, priests and parish lay representatives, together as a community and in the spirit of prayer, gathered to look back at the past five years since 1995 of pastoral initiatives, to see where they have moved forward and where they have not.

Some assembly participants lamented the fact that the 109 decrees of PAPL II were not specific enough to suit the local situation as they simply reflected the general decrees of PCP II. In other words, while progress has been made to some extent, the main obstacles were the lack of commitment on the part of the people involved, notably that

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<sup>25</sup> Other points that were considered in this context were: a) the emerging of priests, lay leaders, pastoral workers, and parishioners in an SKK-oriented parish; b) role of religious organizations in an SKK-oriented parish; c) development projects and programs in the parishes; and d) relationship of the local Church (and an SKK-oriented parish for that matter) with other sects.

of the parish priest, and the lack of congruence between the actual situation in the parish and that which was presupposed by the CPDP and the PAPL II decrees.

But while there was obvious frustration as a result of this negative evaluation, the assembly participants did not give in to discouragement. Instead, all the more did they see the need to regenerate their interest and inject renewed focus and direction to pastoral initiatives by making recommendations on how to correct the mistakes of the past and to make a fresh start. This time, there was more concern on how to make pastoral programs and plans more realistic, more feasible and more relevant to the local situation. As a result, the participants drafted anew a set of 48 decrees (articles)<sup>26</sup> which a Special Commission, formed from among the assembly participants, further refined and which the bishop finally promulgated on December 3, 2000.

The 48 decrees called for profound conversion on the part of all agents of renewal in the local Church. The foreword itself to the PAPL III decrees could not have said it any better:

*(The agents of renewal) are called to work in solidarity as People of God in order to set new direction from being a purely hierarchical Church to a missionary one, from being minister-centered to people-oriented, from mere evangelizers to living witnesses themselves, from erecting only physical structures to building communities of faith, hope and love (SKK), from giving more attention to the affluent to caring (for) the least in the Kingdom of God, and giving more time to those who need conversion than to those who are apparently saved<sup>27</sup>.*

Beautifully said indeed! But one other thing that these decrees had tried to emphasize, one that should not escape notice, was that the task of building communities was the work of all agents of renewal. From the bishop, to the priests and lay leaders - all are called in concerted effort to build small Christian communities (SKK) to give face to the renewed Church that the local of Church of Libmanan was being called to become in the new millenium.

The turn of events at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 proved to be truly providential. Just as resignation and discouragement were about to set in, PAPL III succeeded in rekindling enthusiasm despite the mistakes and failures of the past. Indeed, PAPL III sparked renewed hope that things would move forward towards the realization of this vision of the local Church of Libmanan of becoming precisely a renewed Church.

To sustain such enthusiasm, there was then no time to waste in the implementation of the PAPL III decrees. Within the span of three years, ASI gathered pastoral workers of the Prelature for several training seminars. First, on August 26-September 1, 2001,

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<sup>26</sup> These forty-eight decrees dwelt on ten areas of concern: a) the bishop, b) priests and religious, c) lay leaders and parishioners, d) religious organizations, movements and trans-parochial organizations, e) finance, f) programs, g) commissions and committees, h) ecumenism, i) local government units and other sectors of networking, and j) documentation.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from I. Trillanes, *The Role of BECs in the Renewal of the Church in the Prelature of Libmanan*.

pastoral workers and Barangay Pastoral Council (BPC) members gathered at the Mater Ecclesiae Formation Center in Cadlan, Pili, for a training seminar which, among other things, dealt once more with how BECs (SKKs) should be organized.<sup>28</sup> The following year, on September 9-12, 2002, all pastoral workers of the Prelature gathered anew to discuss topics not only directly pertaining to SKK animation but also including such topics as spirituality and commitment, leadership and human relations.<sup>29</sup> Finally, on the third year, during a gathering of the same pastoral workers on September 8-11, 2003, input was given on the deepening of understanding of the nature and dynamics of the SKK.<sup>30</sup>

There was a purpose for all these training seminars. Those who took part in them, members of the Barangay Pastoral Councils and pastoral workers, were chosen to constitute the *Parish Formators' Team* (PFT). The task of the PFT was indispensable in SKK-building as it was charged in turn with the responsibility of conducting and facilitating a series of formation seminars for SKK cluster leaders. The first of these seminars, one that was mainly orientational, took place from October 2002 to January 2003, the second from May to August 2003, the third from August to September 2005, the fourth and the fifth from February to June 2006.

The implementation of the PAPL III decrees and the renewed vigor in building SKKs brought to the fore two important realizations that changed the face of the local Church of Libmanan. First, SKK was to be "*a new way of being Church*" as well as a way of renewing the local Church of Libmanan. Second, SKK was to be the *raison d'être* of the Prelature of Libmanan precisely because SKK-building was what was envisioned in its vision-mission statement.

This time, however, the whole process of SKK-building had to follow a certain strategy and framework, one that begins with *model building* according to which a fully developed BEC model that is responsive to the culture and situation of the local Church is designed. Part of this step is the preparation of culturally rooted activities as initial venues for gathering people and for sustaining the same gatherings. Then the process continues on to *capacity building*. That is, through trainings, the ability of the agents of renewal for sustainable SKK implementation is developed and enhanced (human resource development). Thus, not only are cluster leaders to be obliged to undergo training in order to increase their capacity for SKK implementation, but priests themselves as well have to undergo the same experience. The final step of this process is *institution building*, according to which policies on the environment, structures, systems,

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<sup>28</sup> Other topics discussed included: a) Christian Human Development: Personhood, Initial Faith Formation, Prayer and Spirituality; b) Understanding the Church: SKK, Liturgy as the Soul and Life of SKK; c) Leadership and Commitment.

<sup>29</sup> Also discussed were the following topics: a) Pastoral Direction of the Prelature of Libmanan; b) Ecclesiology and Christology; c) Facilitation and Documentation; d) Biblico-Pastoral Orientation; and e) Liturgy Alive.

<sup>30</sup> Topics during this third year of training seminar were rather mixed but nonetheless dominated by dogmatic themes: a) Servant Leader, b) Social Analysis, c) Church, d) Christology, e) Sacraments, f) Eucharist, g) Mariology, h) Bible, i) Church Financial System, j) Planning, Coordinating and Implementing Church activities.



systems and strategies consistent with the vision-mission of the SKK are well defined. An outcome in this stage of SKK-building is structural reorganization and the parish clustering of families.

All these, one might say, were the accomplishment of PAPL III and such was its impact on the local Church of Libmanan. It was to be indeed the beginning of profound renewal and change. Happily, this renewal is now beginning to be felt. Every parish in the Prelature is now SKK-saturated, with clusters of communities reaching 3,765 in 2007, and the numbers continue to grow to this day. Finally, an SKK-culture is beginning to be felt everywhere. In fact, one cannot talk about the Prelature of Libmanan without being drawn to the SKK-atmosphere that now prevails in the whole Prelature.

### **The Rise in Vocations and More New Parishes**

Perhaps one of the things that remained unnoticed over the years, something that may have indeed been easily taken for granted, was the rise in the number of vocations in the Prelature. It should be recalled that at the time of separation in 1989, the Prelature had only 19 active diocesan priests. Only 3 of this number came from the Prelature itself, the rest being from the mother diocese. Records also show that the Prelature had at that time only 3 minor seminarians and 15 major seminarians, that is, including both theology and philosophy (college) seminarians. From this number of major seminarians, only 4 became priests within the next six years, that is, from 1990 to 1995. The first ever ordination in the Prelature took place in 1991, with *Ramon Claro* from Milaor, Camarines Sur, being the very first to have been ordained for the Prelature.

Between 1996 and 2001, 17 more priests were ordained for the Prelature, bringing the total number of priests to 34 by 2001. Of this number, however, 2 sought excommunication, 3 went on mission abroad, 2 went on study leave, 1 simply took a leave of absence and 1 died. By year end of 2001, there were only 29 priests who were actively engaged in the ministry within the Prelature itself, not counting those who left as already mentioned. It was still a small number but nonetheless an additional of 10 more priests to the original 19 who were incardinated to the Prelature at the time of separation. Moreover, however small this number might have been, it was enough to fill in the need for a few more priests resulting from the creation of 5 more parishes within this period. In fact, with only 21 parishes by 2001, and a couple more positions in the curia, there were 6 more priests at this time who could be assigned as parochial vicars in the bigger parishes.

Judging from these numbers, the vocation situation in the Prelature certainly looked positive. There was not much improvement between 2002 and 2008 as the Prelature was able to produce only 6 priests within this period. Still, this small number brought the total number of priests working in the Prelature to 32 by 2008.

As the number of priests in the Prelature was increasing, so was the number of parishes. Never hindered by its lack of resources, the Prelature has grown to include 27 parishes

by 2008. Following the creation of St. Anthony Parish in Mambulo in 2001, six more new parishes were created within the span of six years.

First, the Parish of St. Anthony of Padua in Binahi-an, Sipocot was opened in 2002, while St. Therese of Lisieux Parish was opened in Tara, Sipocot in 2003. In the same year 2003, a new parish was created in Bahay, Libmanan with St. Joseph, the Patriarch as its Patron. In 2004, two parishes were also created: one in Antipolo, Minalabac, the Parish of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, and the other in Mataoroc, Minalabac, the Parish of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, once again under the SOLT Community. Finally, in 2006, the Holy Family Parish was opened in Colacling, Lupi.

### **Other Developments within the Last Decade**

As the SKK Program made progress in many parishes in accordance with the recommendations of PAPL III, there was a growing need for a Prelature-wide Director to oversee the program and coordinate all other pastoral programs in the parishes rather than just leave these in the hands of parish priests all by themselves. It was then that Bishop Arellano created the Office of the *Vicar General for Pastoral Programs*. He appointed *Michael de la Rosa* to fill in the position for it was he after all who initiated the implementation of the SKK in the Prelature. For now, there were two Vicars General in the Prelature, the other being *Manuel Ricafort* who was designated Vicar General for Administration, a position he had been holding since the time of separation.

On August 24-25, 2005, in a surprise move, then Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, *Archbishop Antonio Franco*, made a pastoral visit in the Prelature. He went around the parishes and held dialogues with both the clergy and the lay faithful. One of the things he broached for in these dialogues was the idea of the Prelature becoming a diocese. In this regard, he openly endorsed the idea, saying that the Prelature was already ready for such eventuality in that it already had the capacity to operate in a way a diocese does. The clergy, for their part, expressed support for the nuncio's recommendations.

In all these, however, Bishop Arellano was ostentatiously absent. Shortly after the nuncio arrived, the bishop had a stroke and had to be confined at the hospital for some time to be able to recover. In fact, he was in this condition up until the time the nuncio left. It even seemed that his health got so bad, he was hard put at recovering.

This was not of course the first time that Bishop Arellano fell so seriously ill. A few years after he was appointed Bishop of Libmanan, he had to undergo a triple heart bypass to remedy his clogged arteries. He recovered then quite well and seemed not to have been seriously debilitated as a result of the surgery. He went about carrying out his responsibilities with nary a sign of what he went through.

Not this time though, for after he left the hospital, he seemed never to have fully recovered. Using a cane, his mobility was hampered. As a result of the stroke, his

eyesight weakened, making it difficult for him even to recognize people around him. Unable to quite fully recover, he decided to spend most of his time at home in Bombon where he is cared for by his relatives, and to report to his office in Libmanan only once or twice within a week. His absence was felt even in such big occasions as the Second Bicol Priests' Congress (BPC II) held in August 2006 and, unable as he was in making long trips, he would miss the regular meetings of the Bicol Bishops which the bishops themselves take turns in hosting in their respective dioceses. He would also thus be away from big celebrations in the Prelature itself, particularly from ordinations during which he should have been the presider, afraid as he always was that he might not be able to endure the rigors of such lengthy celebrations.

Bishop Arellano was also absent mostly from clergy meetings which the priests therefore had to conduct by themselves. It was in one of these meetings that the priests decided to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Prelature in 2010. They agreed to hold a two-year celebration beginning 2008, around the theme, "*Regalo na inako, Balaog nin Pagbabago, Biyaya na hinihiras*". The opening of the grand celebration was held on March 19, 2008, the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Prelature's canonical erection, and made to coincide with the holding of the Rural Congress being organized by NASSA and the CBCP Social Action Commission under Bishop B. Pabillo (Auxiliary Bishop of Manila). Bishop J. Rojas (Auxiliary Bishop of Caceres) was invited to preside over the eucharistic celebration, while Bp. F. Claver (Bishop Emeritus of Bontoc-Lagawe) was tasked to give a talk to the congress participants. Bishop Arellano made an effort to be present during the occasion, but again because of his weak condition, he hardly participated in the proceedings, and contented himself just by giving a short message after mass.

Bishop Arellano must have been aware all the time that it was becoming more and more difficult, as it was a bit stressful, for him to fulfill his responsibilities. As early as January 17, 2007, on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he sent the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, his letter of resignation, citing ailing health as his primary reason for stepping down. Full of humility, he told the Holy Father that he would no longer want to be a burden to the Prelature. Having expressed his sentiments, it was now up to the Holy See to act on his petition to be relieved of his office as Bishop of Libmanan.

### **The Dawning of a New Administration**

Bishop Arellano's petition was not left unheeded for long as might have been expected given the pace of how things are being processed at the Vatican. But one year and four months after he submitted his letter of resignation to the Holy See, on May 19, 2008, the Vatican News Agency announced that the Holy Father was accepting Bishop Arellano's resignation as Bishop of Libmanan and that in his place he was appointing Bishop J. Rojas, erstwhile Auxiliary Bishop of Caceres. After eighteen years in office, Bishop Arellano was finally relieved and was able to pass on the burden of responsibility to his successor. In its press release, the Vatican News Agency declared:

*Il Santo Padre ha accettato la rinuncia al governo pastorale della prelatura di Libmanan (Filippine), presentata da S.E. Mons. Prospero N. Arellano, in conformità al can. 401 § 2 del Codice di Diritto Canonico.*

*Il Papa ha nominato Vescovo-Prelato di Libmanan (Filippine) S.E. Mons. José Rojas Rojas jr., finora Vescovo Ausiliare di Caceres.*

Following this announcement, a date immediately was fixed for the installation of the newly appointed bishop, July 2, 2008. On this date, in solemn rites presided over by Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi, Metropolitan Archbishop of Caceres, and witnessed by the Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, Archbishop Edward Adams, and some bishops from Bicol and elsewhere in the country, the new Bishop was installed and took canonical possession of the Prelature of Libmanan.

In his homily, during the mass, Rojas extolled St. Joseph, the Principal Patron of the Prelature, who expressed his faith and obedience to the will of God, all in silence. And finding resonance with the Patron's experience in his own experience, he said that in this whole ritual of the canonical possession of the local Church, it was as though a marriage was taking place, that is, between him and the local Church of Libmanan, not because he chose her to be his spouse but rather because God has given her to him as a gift - in much the same way that Joseph found himself accepting the Blessed Virgin Mary in marriage, not because he chose her but rather because she was God's gift to him. He admonished his priests to love this local Church as much as he does, now that he is her pastor, and to stay and resist from being lured by whatever it is that they might find attractive outside. He thanked them in the end for accepting him as their bishop.

As soon as he assumed office, the new bishop moved quickly to get things going, making decisions that involved the health insurance of the clergy, liturgical reform, administrative appointments, and the establishment of St. Benedict Seminary in San Fernando, Camarines Sur.

#### *a) Health Insurance for the Clergy*

Realizing that health care was one of the things that the priests were most concerned about, he solicited funding from sources abroad by way of mass stipends and asked the priests if they were willing to assume the responsibility of saying these masses so that the amount could be used exclusively to replenish their health insurance fund. The priests readily agreed and were thus able to collectively obtain some modest amount. A small amount yet it was, but enough to bolster some sense of security for the moment in times of need and emergency.

#### *b) Liturgical Reform*

The timing of the new bishop's coming into the Prelature was just right as it were, as it was opportune, in initiating some sort of a liturgical reform in the Prelature. It was

around this time that the Bicol dioceses introduced the use of the new Bicol translation of the Order of the Mass. The neighboring Archdiocese of Caceres had actually already used this new translation since 2006, but the other Bicol dioceses followed the lead only in March 2008, following the publication of the text in official form containing the approbation issued by all Bicol Bishops in their meeting in Labo, Camarines Norte on February 2, 2008.

The delay of the use of the new translation in the Prelature may have been to its advantage after all in that it was only at this time when the official text was available, sparing the Prelature from the confusion of the period of experimentation. Besides, it was also at this time when the complete set of liturgical songs based on the new text had also become available. The new bishop instructed his priests not to use the new translation without prior catechesis. While he planned to visit all parishes during his first months in office, he decided to do the catechesis himself. By the end of September 2008, he was able to visit all parishes but one remaining in the Prelature.

### *c) Administrative Appointments*

Likewise, to keep things going and to delineate clearly the line of accountability in his administration, the new bishop moved swiftly to reappoint *Manuel Ricafort* as Vicar General for Administration and is therefore to take charge when the bishop is out of the Prelature. He also reappointed *Michael de la Rosa* as Vicar General for Pastoral Programs and is to take charge only when the bishop and the VG for Administration are both out of the Prelature or may not be available for certain functions. During the Priests' Assembly in Antipolo, Minalabac, at which he presided for the very first time since assuming office, the bishop made it clear that even in the administration of the sacrament of confirmation, which from now on shall be done by district, such line of accountability shall be observed, before recourse is made to the episcopal vicars in the three districts.

To foster collaborative participation in the administration of the Prelature, the bishop restored the Board of Consultors which he convened a day prior to the Priests' Assembly in Antipolo. The Board of Consultors is now composed of the two Vicars General, the Chancellor, the three episcopal vicars and the president of the Presbyteral Council.

During the assembly itself, the new bishop distributed appointment papers to the Chairmen of various commissions and instructed them to have their respective commissions organized in preparation for the reconvening of the PCC for a five-year pastoral planning under the VG for Pastoral Programs. Two new commissions were created to complement the other (already existing) eleven commissions, namely, the Commission on Church and Rectory Construction (CCRC) which shall recommend to the bishop for approval parish construction projects and the Commission on Legal Affairs and Church Properties (CLACP) which shall assist the bishop in legal matters and function as custodian of all Church lands and properties.

#### *d) Establishment of St. Benedict Seminary*

One development that was enthusiastically welcomed by the clergy was the establishment of St. Benedict Seminary in San Fernando, Camarines Sur which shall initially house all 10 theology seminarians of the Prelature currently undergoing priestly formation at the Holy Rosary Major Seminary in Naga. It was during the bishop's visit in San Fernando to give catechesis on the new Bicol translation of the mass, on July 11, 2008, when the decision to found the Prelature's seminary was made. The bishop had actually been entertaining this idea the day he was assigned to Libmanan, but it was during this visit that he made up his mind. It could not have been a lot easier for the bishop to make that decision had it not been for the generosity of *Antonio Felix*, Parish Priest of San Fernando, who offered to house the seminary at the second floor of the Parish Pastoral Center which he built with the help of his parishioners. Seeing that such portion of the building being proposed was suitable enough if it were to be only slightly remodelled without much expense, the bishop saw this as indeed the opportune time to establish the Prelature's seminary. That day, being the feast of St. Benedict, and wanting to honor Benedict XVI whose pontificate draws inspiration from this great saint of Nurcia and during whose same pontificate the seminary was founded, he decided to name the seminary, *St. Benedict Seminary*.

The decision to found a seminary was far from being arbitrary though at first glance it may appear to the contrary. The fact is, several reasons prompted the bishop to make such a move. *First*, the number of vocations in the Prelature has risen in recent years, and this trend is unlikely to change in the coming years given the efficiency of vocation recruitment now in place in the Prelature. *Second*, if the Prelature were to move towards the direction of becoming a diocese, having a seminary of its own will bolster its chances of reaching that status. *Third*, the Pastoral Plan and Strategy of the Prelature with its emphasis on the formation of the SKK in all the parishes, demands that the Prelature have its own Priestly Formation Program that will address this particular need. *Fourth*, and quite as important, having a seminary of its own could mean relief from the heavy financial burden of having to subsidize the education of the Prelature's seminarians if they were to continue studying as interns in neighboring Caceres or elsewhere. For want of priest-formators, the bishop decided to act as interim Rector and appointed *Giovanni Argarin* as Procurator, while asking Parish Priests in neighboring parishes to act as part-time spiritual directors.

#### **Conclusion: Towards Becoming a Diocese**

The Prelature of Libmanan has been in existence already for eighteen years. In 2010, it shall celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its canonical erection. All these years, the Prelature had gone a long way. For sure, there have been setbacks and these were many. For one thing, resources remain scarce. For many years, in fact, this has been the Prelature's main predicament. It does not have adequate funds to support its programs, much less

the logistics to procure facilities for its apostolates and to build infrastructure support. But in many ways more than one, the Prelature has become truly rich in its own way.

Indeed, the Prelature of Libmanan is a poor Church. But as envisioned by PCP II, it is not only a "*poor Church*". It has also become a *Church "for" the Poor* and more so a *Church "of" the Poor*. Paradoxically, however, such poverty has also become its fountain of wealth, giving concrete expression as it were to the Lord's discourse at the mount - "*Blessed are the Poor*"! For in many ways, the Prelature has also become *rich in faith*, and it has been made even much richer by the thriving and flourishing of small Christian communities (SKKs), built around this faith. These communities are the Prelature's treasure, its *pearl of great price*. It is on account of this "*treasure*" that the Prelature has quite progressed and is slowly moving forward towards maturity as a local Church. Sheer numbers for sure would not be enough to serve as indicators of this movement. Time will tell if indeed the Prelature has moved in this direction of growth, but recent developments must have already borne this out. Indeed, the moment is not far, as it has become opportune, for the local Church of Libmanan to obtain the crown it can now claim to be its own, the status and the dignity befitting a diocese.

*Post scriptum*

On March 25, 2009, His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI elevated the Prelature of Libmanan to the status and rank of a diocese.

**Ipsi gloria in saecula!**