

THE PASSAGE: FROM A PRELATURE TO A DIOCESE

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The Good News

On the *Feast of the Annunciation*, the 25th of March 2009, a new era has dawned on the local Church of Libmanan. On this day, at the Vatican, an announcement was made:

Il Santo Padre ha elevato al rango di diocesi la prelatura territoriale di Libmanan (Filippine), con la medesima denominazione e configurazione territoriale, rendendola suffraganea della chiesa metropolitana di Caceres.

Having to make the same announcement himself on the same day and at the same time in the new diocese, the Bishop-Prelate of the erstwhile Prelature, *Jose Rojas*, made sure his priests were there to share with him the joy of such happy news. He gathered them, clueless as they were for any reason for the gathering whatsoever due to the imposed information embargo, at the Parish of the Prelature's patron, *St. Joseph the Patriarch*, in Bahay, Libmanan. There, almost as immediately after the announcement was made, the bishop and the priests present celebrated a mass of thanksgiving, overwhelmed and overjoyed.

The faithful of the Diocese of Libmanan, were naturally moved by a sense of profound gratitude for such a tremendous grace, yet equally never forgetful of their humble beginnings. The local Church of Libmanan was born almost twenty four years ago a struggling and poor Church and to this day she remains to be so, though this time with a difference. Indeed, the local Church of Libmanan is a poor Church, but rich in faith and only so blessed because of the graciousness and mercy of God.

When It All Began

The story tells it all – why inspite of such lowly beginnings the new diocese came into being. Twenty four years ago, the local Church of Libmanan was born from the vast ecclesiastical territory of the Metropolitan Church of Caceres. On January 12, 1989, then Archbishop of Caceres, *Leonardo Legaspi*, petitioned the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, saying,

...because of the great number of people to be served in the present Archdiocese of Caceres, the large area of ecclesiastical territory, complicated by the great lack of roads and means of communication, I most humbly wish to request Your Holiness, to create a new ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the form of a Prelature taken from the present Archdiocese of Caceres, of which I am its humble Pastor.

Seeing enough justification for Archbishop Legaspi's request, given such compelling reason, the Holy Father could not but agree. On December 9, 1989, he dutifully issued the bull *Philippinis in insulis*, causing the creation of a Territorial Prelature, designating Libmanan as its seat, at the same time effecting its separation from the Metropolitan Church of Caceres, and finally appointing *Prospero Arellano* as the first Bishop-Prelate to head the new ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Spread out in nine towns of the first district of Camarines Sur, and one town in the second district,

the new Prelature had but 16 parishes, and served by only 19 diocesan priests including the new bishop himself.

One would expect that such an event would be greeted with joy and great jubilation, the same feeling that surrounds the birth of new life into this world. The Catholic faithful of Libmanan must have welcomed the separation in this way. But no, there was also a pervading sense of helplessness and gloom especially among the clergy, though for the most part such feeling was muted and suppressed. But indeed, many of them felt forsaken and abandoned, even rejected. It was very natural for them to feel that way because most of them were strangers to the new territory, who ended up incardinated to it not because they chose to but because they were simply caught on that side of the divide by the unexpected separation.

They felt more so perhaps because of the daunting task ahead, that of building up the new local Church in a situation of deprivation and poverty. They were least prepared for this eventuality. They were very few to begin with, a measly nineteen of them in the presbyterium, and the resources at hand were too scarce. The dowry that came from the Mother Church, in some measure already sizable at that time, did very little to provide the much-needed comfort. But move on they must as there was hardly anything they could do to reverse the situation.

At first, they had no choice but to depend on the resources of the mother diocese. For one thing, the Prelature had no pastoral program of its own. Most of what was done in the parishes simply had to follow and replicate the WESTY structure and framework in Caceres. Its priests and Church personnel had to be enrolled into the Health Insurance System of the diocese of origin since it was not just possible to set up its own. Indeed, during those first few years of existence, the Prelature could not quite separate itself completely from the mother diocese.

It was, however, becoming clear that 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 provide the means to support its various apostolates.

At first, it looked as though this was going to take a long time. But a breakthrough came. On January 20 to February 17, 1991, only a year or so after the Prelature was established, the Philippine Hierarchy convened the historic *Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* in Manila. It gave the Prelature occasion to conduct consultations and conferences in the parishes aimed at obtaining an adequate picture of the situation of the local Church. The exercise yielded the conclusion that a different situation was slowly evolving in the Prelature, with its own peculiar needs and problems that were quite distinct from those of the Mother Church. When the Prelature's delegates came back from the Council, they brought home with them an insight that would turn out to determine the future agenda in the life and mission of the local Church of Libmanan, that is, the Council's delineation of the image of the Church in the Philippines as a "*Community of Disciples*" and a "*Church of the Poor*".

Inspired by such insight, and wanting to give it concrete expression, Bishop Arellano called for a pastoral consultation that further evolved into what is now called the *First Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan*. The most significant accomplishment of this gathering was that 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 formulate its own *mission statement*. According to such vision, the local Church of Libmanan aspired to become “*a renewed Church characterized by an evangelized and evangelizing Community of Disciples, journeying with Christ in the Poor, for the total transformation of creation.*” This was to be realized through a commitment to “*wholistic, integral and inculturated evangelization, participative ministry to witnessing small faith communities and the responsible stewardship of creation.*”

Obviously, this was only the first step. The hard part was how to give flesh to such vision and mission. While efforts were initiated and pursued towards this end, the bishop undertook the strenuous task of pastoral visitation of the parishes. His purpose was not only canonical. He 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 in every parish. But if there was one thing that these visits generated, it was the realization on the part of the bishop that pastoral services could be improved if there were more parishes in the Prelature. And so it was that he started creating new parishes in 1994 so that by 2008, the number of parishes has already increased from the 16 pioneering parishes to 27, or an additional of 11 parishes within the last 20 years.

Quite providentially, vocations to the priesthood have also increased. By 2008, the number of priests in the Prelature rose to 32 from the original 19 who initially served the Prelature, making it possible to sustain the trend of creating new parishes, and this was so, not counting those who opted to leave and serve in other dioceses as missionaries.

But while creating new parishes ensured improvement in pastoral services and the administration of the sacraments, this was obviously only half of the entire picture of what the life and mission of the local Church should entail according to its vision and mission. More important to ask was whether the faithful truly had the sense of being Church and of being community, and the sense of belonging that this required, and whether this sense of being Church was rooted in the gospel.

This was the question that the *Second Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan*, convened on March 15-18, 1994, had to address. During the assembly, the participants expressed their disappointments and frustrations in the way pastoral initiatives were being carried out. But then all these generated yet another breakthrough in the history of the Church of Libmanan, the formulation of the five-year *Comprehensive Pastoral Development Program*. The participants were one in urging that the Prelature must always project the image of a renewed Church in its life and mission. Finally, they all expressed the desire of having as end product of all their efforts the formation of small Christian communities in all the parishes, what was going to be called the *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* or the SKK as they are now more expediently called. From now on, it was the SKK that would give concrete “*face*” to the Church of Libmanan. From now on, it was the SKK that would give flesh to the “*Renewed Church*” that the Prelature had always dreamt of becoming one day.

While everything looked bright on paper, the real challenge remained: how to make the SKK a living reality. Things had to start somehow, somewhere. It was a courageous parish priest in *Cabusao*, *Michael de la Rosa*, who had the audacity to make the first bold step. He started organizing his parishioners 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. To his surprise, 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 “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. But soon the experience paid off as communities of families began to take shape in the various villages in the parish. Soon enough, these communities became more and more involved in the life of the parish.

Successful as this pioneering effort might have been, the other priests, even the bishop himself, continued to have doubts if the Cabusao experience could be duplicated in the other parishes of the Prelature. The strategy worked in Cabusao, they thought, because it was small and manageable. There were thus nagging fears that the same strategy might not just work if it were to be implemented in larger parishes. Such skepticism, however, would eventually be proven wrong. When the SKK was introduced here at *St. James the Great Parish* (Libmanan), unmistakably one of the largest parishes in the Prelature, it was such a resounding success. And then, there was *Lupi*, a parish different from both Cabusao and Libmanan in that it had a different terrain, many of its villages being remotely and inaccessibly situated in the mountainous areas of the parish. But here, too, the SKK flourished.

From these three pioneering experiences, however tentative and experimental they might have been, the priests of the Prelature must have learned their lesson. Each one of them eventually had a change of heart as the message was loud and clear. If only they would commit themselves with dedication, enthusiasm and zeal to such a pastoral undertaking, 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 continued to rise as years passed.

When the *Third Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan* was convened on September 4-7, 2000, everyone in the assembly recognized that “*basic ecclesial communities*” such as the SKK were the “life and hope for a renewed Church in the third millenium.”

While all these were taking place, very few people outside the Prelature knew that something significant was taking place here. For one thing, few people knew that the Prelature has had three pastoral assemblies, a feat which by no means could be belittled considering that in many ways they measured up to the scope and importance of synodal gatherings. Few people knew that as a result, a culture of evangelism was slowly evolving within the local Church, the tangible manifestation of which was the emergence of small Christian communities, the SKK. For all the clergy and the faithful knew, they woke up one day to realize that the SKK has become *a new way of being Church* in this part of the Bicol Church. The SKK has become a byword. It has become the identifying mark of Libmanan as a local Church.

Both the clergy and the lay faithful saw no reason why they should bask with self-indulgent pride and feel complacent at this turn of events for there was yet obviously much to do, and neither could they claim in the first place all the credit for themselves. Yet this gave them unavoidably some feeling of satisfaction in the sense that the vision they have so nurtured in their dreams was

slowly taking tangible form. At least they could say that there was now a concrete semblance in the local Church of what PCP II had called the “*Community of Disciples*” and the “*Church of the Poor*”. If only because of this, one can truly say that the local Church of Libmanan has grown, indeed in a different and perhaps unconventional yet significant way, and few people from without had an inkling to even take notice.

For all the good things that happened, the situation was anything but ideal when the new Bishop-Prelate took possession of the Prelature of Libmanan on July 2, 2008. The finances of the prelature was far from stable to say the least and infrastructure was hardly in place to support the various pastoral initiatives already undertaken. Both limitations then were to become two of the bishop’s urgent concerns as he took office. First, the bishop sought to restore fiscal balance. He set up individual funds for various needs in the prelature so as to avoid the juggling of resources and expenses which was one of the reasons for the budget-overshot almost every year. Second, with the cost required for the formation of seminarians draining the resources of the prelature, barely nine days in office, on July 11, 2008 on the *Feast of St. Benedict of Nursia*, the bishop decided to establish a diocesan seminary in San Fernando (Camarines Sur). The seminarians of the prelature until then were sent to different seminaries, primarily to the seminaries of Caceres. The bishop named the seminary after the saint whose feast it was that day, *St. Benedict Seminary*.

But there was far more to the establishment of the seminary than just the financial difficulty of subsidizing the studies of the seminarians. *First*, the number of vocations in the Prelature was expected to rise in the coming years, and this trend is unlikely to change given the efficiency of vocation recruitment that has been put 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 would 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, demanded that the Prelature have its own Priestly Formation Program that will address this particular need.

Evolving into a Diocese

Hand in hand with the decision to establish the seminary, another major decision the bishop made as he took office was to petition the Holy See to have the Prelature of Libmanan elevated to the rank and dignity of a diocese. Such idea for a change of status did not just come from nowhere. It turned out that as early as August 24-25, 2005, then Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, *Antonio Franco*, during his pastoral visit to the Prelature, told the clergy and the lay faithful that the local Church of Libmanan had already gained enough maturity that made it apt to be conferred the status of a diocese. The nuncio must have seen something noteworthy that made him think and believe so. Certainly, it must not have been financial stability and the acquisition of vast resources for from such perspective the Prelature remained to look like a fledgling and struggling institution. Funds remained scarce and infrastructure support wanting. The nuncio did not quite spell out what he saw, but on hindsight it must have been the faith of the people that impressed him, a faith that was alive in the burgeoning small Christian communities, the *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* (SKK). The clergy could not but agree. During a meeting of the Prelature’s *Programs Coordinating Council* (PCC) held shortly thereafter, on

January 4, 2006, a group was constituted to work on the Nuncio's recommendation.¹ Nothing concrete, however, came out of this initiative. The group subsequently met at Playa del Sol (Pasacao, Camarines Sur), on January 9-10, 2006, supposedly to "draft [a] framework" of whatever (?) it was the group had in mind to fulfill the task it was charged to carry out.² Nothing of the kind, however, it now seems, had ever been accomplished as no copy thereof could be found anywhere in the chancery's files. In any case, it would now also appear that the group was perhaps at a loss as to what the requirements really were so that the petition for the change of status might be forwarded to the Holy See. What might have been a simple process must have been construed as something complex, thus any outcome from efforts that had been initiated that far has gotten hard to come by. In fact, on the matter of changing a local Church's canonical and juridical status, no "framework" of any kind is actually needed, just sheer documentation showing the growth of the local Church.

In any case, taking the Nuncio's recommendation as cue and after having obtained the consent of the consultors,³ and confirmation by the clergy,⁴ the new bishop set out to prepare in late July of 2008 the documents required for submission to the Holy See. By November 3, 2008, upon the endorsement of the Bicol Bishops of the Metropolitan Province of Caceres, the petition was forwarded to the CBCP General Secretariat for deliberation by the Conference's Permanent Council.

In his letter to the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, on November 3, 2008, Rojas enumerated various indications of the tremendous growth of the Prelature in recent years in terms of Catholic population, in the number of vocations, in the number of priests and parishes, and most especially in the flourishing of the *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* (SKK). On these grounds, Rojas entreated the Holy Father:

...upon consultation with the clergy and faithful of the Prelature of Libmanan, and above all, with the bishops of the Metropolitan Church of Caceres, of which the Prelature is a suffragan, I humbly ask Your Holiness to graciously grant this, our petition, to have the Prelature of Libmanan elevated into the status of a Diocese.

Subsequently put to a votation during the CBCP Plenary Assembly on January 24, 2009, the petition was approved by the bishops with nary an objection.⁵ More than enough was such an endorsement that the Nunciature dispatched the petition to the Holy See in early February 2009. And the wait was not going to be long either for as early as March 18, 2009, on the eve of the Feast

¹ This group was composed of four priests, namely, *Michael de la Rosa, Granwell Pitapit, Arvin Olivan, Apolinario Napoles Jr.*, and one layman, *Ric Laureles*. The group was called "technical working group" and was tasked to work on what the agenda of the meeting called "*On Institutionalization of Prelature Structure to a Diocese status*" (see *Minutes of PCC Meeting*, PLDFI Office, January 4, 2006). In terms of organization, the structure of a Prelature is no different from the structure of a Diocese, that is, as provided by Canon Law. Thus, it is not at all clear as to what the group might have meant by "institutionalization of prelature structure to a diocese status".

² See *Minutes of PCC Meeting*, January 4, 2006.

³ *Minutes of the Board of Consultors' Meeting*, Libmanan, Camarines Ssur, July 19, 2008, p. 6.

⁴ *Minutes of Clergy Meeting*, Minalabac, Camarines Sur, July 21, 2008, p. 3.

⁵ See *Minutes of the 98th Plenary Assembly of the CBCP*, January 24-25, 2010, p. 10. See also *Selective Analytical Index, Plenary Assemblies/Permanent Council Meetings 1945-2012*, CBCP Manila, 2013, p. 207.

of the Prelature's Patron, St. Joseph the Patriarch, the Apostolic Nuncio relayed the news to Rojas that the Holy Father has gladly approved the petition to elevate the See of Libmanan to the rank and dignity of a diocese and that he (Rojas) was being appointed its first diocesan bishop. Thus, on March 25, 2009, on the Feast of the Annunciation, the day such happy news was officially announced, the *Diocese of Libmanan* was as it were (re)born. The announcement in the new diocese, the bishop thought, had to be done in a dramatic fashion. He gathered the priests in the Parish of St. Joseph in Bahay (Libmanan), who were unwittingly lured to the place, made to believe that new parish assignments were going to be announced that evening of the gathering. They found themselves instead concelebrating in the Eucharistic celebration presided by the bishop, during which the announcement was made, simultaneously that it was, in Rome. In the entire diocese, the announcement was greeted with great jubilation!

Presided over by the Metropolitan Archbishop of Caceres, *Leonardo Legaspi*, and the other Bicol Bishops⁶ and the Nuncio himself, *Edward Joseph Adams*, in attendance, the canonical erection of the new diocese and the installation of the new diocesan bishop took place on June 19, 2009. In his homily, Rojas declared:

...I could see the inspiration of our Patron, St. Joseph, at work in all these. Like St. Joseph, who worked and built up his family in the silence of his heart, the clergy and the faithful of Libmanan worked silently as well to build up the local Church and its small faith communities.

...the Church of Libmanan, though poor as it always has been, was now keeping a treasure, a pearl of great price – that is, the faith of its people, faith that is lived out in (these) small Christian communities. What more, indeed, can make this Church more vibrant, more enlivened by the gospel Jesus preached to the world? What more can truly make it a Community of Disciples and a Church of the Poor?

The whole liturgical celebration was marked by the vast attendance of the faithful, most of whom were the poor of the diocese, who were given the chance to process to the altar during the offertory to hand in their "widow's mite". The procession lasted forty-five minutes, thus prolonging the celebration by almost an hour. When Rojas apologized to the Nuncio for what to many had been an undue and punishing delay, he responded, "Why should you be sorry? When will the poor ever get the chance of sharing the limelight? It is not very frequent that they are given such place of honor and recognition." In so scant a reflection that it was, the Nuncio affirmed what the local Church of Libmanan had aspired to become all along, that of being a "Community of Disciples" and a "Church of and for the Poor".

A New Sense of Identity and Direction

Still getting used to the new name and clumsily switching between the appellation of *prelature* and *diocese*, both the clergy and the faithful needed time to get used to the new reality. New, not in the sense that things have drastically changed as to signal a complete and abrupt departure

⁶ The other Bicol Bishops who were present were *Manolo de los Santos* of Virac, *Arturo Bastes* of Sorsogon, *Lucilo Quiambao* of Legazpi, *Joel Baylon* of Masbate, *Gilbert Garcera* of Daet, and *Jose Sorra* of Legazpi. Also present was *Giorgio Chezza*, Secretary to the Nuncio.

from the past, but new in the sense of having a renewed sense of dignity and of having an awareness and consciousness of something so much desired that has been finally achieved. Externally, things looked very much the same as they were before. But deep within was a sense of pride, a sense of identity in everyone never experienced before. A new beginning has indeed dawned in the Diocese of Libmanan.

Spurred by this newfound sense of identity, the bishop realized that the recent events were drawing the diocese towards a new direction. For him, it was time to conceive and cherish a new *vision* and with it chart a new *mission* as well. On November 15, 2009, he commissioned M. De la Rosa, Vicar General for Pastoral Programs, to set in motion preparations for the holding of a *Diocesan Pastoral Assembly* (DPA), precisely for the purpose of revisiting, through a participatory process, the vision-mission of old and see whether this was still compelling, capable of attracting commitment, and of energizing the local Church given its present situation.⁷ When De la Rosa – designated *ex officio* Chairman of the DPA Preparatory Commission – convened the PCC for a meeting on December 29, 2009 to discuss the bishop’s mandate, everyone already sensed a palpably prevailing air of confidence: this time the diocese could hold the pastoral assembly on its own without the benefit of external *technical* help.⁸ It was not, however, out of self-indulgent pride that this sentiment was felt but rather out of a sense of empowerment borne only because of past experience of much uncertainty and struggle.

As the discussion progressed, everyone agreed that if the process of crafting a new vision-mission were to be participatory, a diocesan-wide consultation would have to be made, one that would include not only the lay faithful, but the clergy, the religious and seminarians as well. Acting as Secretary to De la Rosa, E. Abogado insisted that if the consultation were to elicit from the people their true sentiment, the “tool” or “instrument” of consultation need not be too technically complicated. He thus proposed that there be only one question that need be asked: “*Ano an boot mong ipahayag sa satuyang simbahan?*” He argued that this simple question would be understandable to all, even to the uneducated, and could generate no less varied and all-inclusive answers regarding the different aspects of the life of the Church: its programs, policies, clergy, religious and laity. In fact, he further surmised that the responses would indicate how the people would assess their situation, what they wanted to achieve (*vision*), and what they wanted to do (*mission*).⁹

On January 31, 2010, in a Pastoral Letter read in all masses that Sunday, the bishop formally announced the holding of the Pastoral Assembly and exhorted the clergy and the lay faithful to take active part in it. He reminded them about the past – of how the local Church of Libmanan once envisioned herself as becoming “*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*” – and that now that she finds herself in the newness of her situation as a diocese, there was need to reinvent herself as to become responsive to this new situation.

⁷ See *Minutes of PCC Meeting*, Pasacao, Camarines Sur, December 29, 2009.

⁸ See *Minutes of PCC Meeting*, Pasacao, Camarines Sur, December 29, 2009. The whole point in this was that there was no need for a vigorous research methodology, only a simple collation of people’s responses to the question-tool of the consultation and styled into a new vision-mission statement.

⁹ See *Minutes of PCC Meeting*, Pasacao, Camarines Sur, December 29, 2009. Though the proposed question was basically accepted, it was nevertheless also proposed that it be supported by clarificatory sub-questions and that the questioning be preceded by a video presentation that would remind those being consulted about the past and how this evolved into the present situation.

Then the series of consultations began. The first of such consultations, which took place at the *Gawad Kalinga* Site in Bahay (Libmanan) on March 23, 2010, was one intended exclusively for the priests of the diocese.¹⁰ In this consultation meeting, the priests were accompanied in reviewing the dynamics in the formulation of a vision-mission statement. More importantly, the bishop also bared his priorities which he hoped would be realized given the impetus of a new vision-mission statement: *a)* formation of priests and seminarians,¹¹ *b)* promotion of the SKK-apostolate,¹² *c)* setting up of specialized apostolates by harnessing the contribution of religious charism,¹³ *d)* liturgical renewal centered on the Eucharist, *e)* ensuring organization and financial stability in the diocese, and *f)* development of diocesan infrastructure.¹⁴

It was remarkable that though expressed in different ways, the salient ideas that emerged during the consultations were almost the same, making all the more that easy to interpret and collate them. The initial draft was prepared for scrutiny and approval by the clergy on June 3, 2010, barely three days after the last consultation at St. Paschal Baylon Parish (Barcelonita, Cabusao) on May 31, 2010. The result was a formulation of a new vision-mission statement that was submitted for confirmation during the Plenary of the Pastoral Assembly itself at St. James the Great Parish (Libmanan, Camarines Sur) on June 5, 2010.¹⁵ With just a few modifications, the assembly participants ratified the following vision/mission statement:

Vision:

SKK:¹⁶ *Local na Simbahan na nagtatalubo pasiring sa Kaboronyogan asin buhay na pagsaksi sa Kahadean.*
(SKK: A local Church growing towards communion and living witness to the Kingdom.)

Mission:

Tanganing mautob an samuyang kamawotan, kami:
(To realize our vision, we shall:)

¹⁰ See *Report on Clergy Workshop for Vision-Mission*, Gawad Kalinga, Bahay (Libmanan, Camarines Sur), March 23, 2010.

¹¹ This priority had the following components: ongoing formation/crisis intervention, health and retirement security, professional development for specialized ministries, vocation recruitment, scholarship for seminarians, and enhancement of seminary formation program.

¹² E.g., service to the poor through social services, promotion of SKK culture, consolidation of pastoral programs for the diocese/parishes, and formation of lay leaders/faithful through evangelization and catechesis.

¹³ E.g., Catholic education/catechesis in public schools, family and youth ministry, religious-administered orphanages, homes for elderly, retreat houses, health care facilities, etc.

¹⁴ E.g., clergy home, seminary physical development, construction, restoration and improvement of parish churches and rectories, etc.

¹⁵ In attendance during the Pastoral Assembly were thirty three (33) diocesan priests, two (2) religious priests, twenty eight (28) pre-college, college and theology seminarians (*auditores*), six (6) religious sisters, two (2) lay *adiutores* and three hundred fifty (250) lay people, representing parish leaders, government officials and sectoral groups that included farmers, fisher folk and the youth.

¹⁶ SKK is the acronym for *Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad* (Small Christian Communities), which given the new vision, now also stands for *Simbahan* (Church), *Kaboronyogan* (Communion), and *Kahadean* (Kingdom).

- a) *Mapaarog nin pusog na liderato moral sa lindong kan ministerio nin pagtarabangan.*
(Exercise morally strong leadership in the context of participative ministry.)
- b) *Matugdas nin mga pusog na estructura asin mapasunod nin mga patakaran na naghihiras nin katongdan sa banwaan.*
(Put in place stable structures and policies that empower the faithful.)
- c) *Mapa-orog nin dusay na pamamahala na nagpapatalubo nin mga komunidad asin nakikisumaro sa kasaraditan.*
(Prioritize a committed stewardship that enables growth of the communities and in solidarity with of the poor.)

As the day was drawing to a close and before the assembly participants gathered at the Libmanan Cathedral for the culminating Eucharistic celebration, a commemorative tree was planted within the Cathedral *patio* to serve as a living reminder of the ecclesial event and to symbolize the aspiration for growth that the new vision envisages: as the tree grows into uncharted heights, the local Church of Libmanan is to grow as well towards deeper communion and living witness to the Kingdom never experienced before. It was a fitting affirmation of what everyone felt as each one left the session hall, a consoling assurance that the collegial encounter about to close owed its success to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the celebration of the Eucharist unfolded, the prevailing mood could not but be one of gratitude and thanksgiving, with the participants feeling renewed, and their commitment rekindled to face and live up to the new challenges posed by the historic gathering.¹⁷ What else could it have been (?) – for everyone, though perhaps unwittingly, had just been part of an immediate expression of the very *vision* just articulated and which from now on each one would aspire for and relish, that is, the experience of *deeper communion* in the just concluded Diocesan Pastoral Assembly.

Strategic Pastoral Planning

As in past similar circumstances, it was obvious that something “enabling” had to be done to consolidate the gains obtained by the Pastoral Assembly. This indeed was the basis for the holding of the *Strategic Pastoral Planning* on March 21-23, 2011 which was convened by the PCC and facilitated by the CDL staff under its Executive Director, *G. Pitapit*. Gathered at the *Mater Ecclesiae Formation Center* (Cadlan, Pili, Camarines Sur), for the three-day planning workshop, priest-participants, led by the bishop himself and joined by the religious and lay leaders,¹⁸ made proposals towards formulating a concrete program of action, feasible within a five-year time frame, that is meant to en flesh efforts to live out the diocese’s new vision-mission. The timing was propitious, occurring as it did just two to three days before the 2nd Anniversary of the birth of the Diocese of Libmanan on March 25, 2011.

¹⁷ See *Quinquennial Report of the Diocese of Libmanan, January 2003–December 2010* (Libmanan, Camarines Sur, 2011), p. 3-5.

¹⁸ Participants included 37 priests (including the bishop), 2 religious sisters, 15 lay people, and 13 speakers (among whom were priests themselves) and Secretariat Staff (mainly from the CDL).

In any case, what the Pastoral Assembly did not particularize, surfaced during the strategic planning. For instance, strategic internal and external factors affecting the diocese were identified and assessed.¹⁹ Revisiting the vision-mission statement also allowed the core values (as well as their sub-values) that form the basis of the vision-mission to be specified, such as *communion, stewardship, integrity and witnessing*.²⁰ More importantly, five goals were identified and translated into goal statements, that is:

1. *Both priests and lay faithful shall undergo formation demanded by their responsibilities, roles and functions within the local Church of Libmanan.*
2. *An effective and efficient organizational structure at the diocesan, parish and barangay levels as expressed in its governance, programs, policies, systems and processes shall be established.*
3. *The Saradit na Kristianong Komunidad (SKK) shall manifest a renewed spiritual life through full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy.*
4. *All relevant and social issues affecting the lives of the local Church will have to be addressed.*
5. *A financial system that will ensure stability in the operations of the diocese and the sustainability of its programs shall be created and implemented.*²¹

An action plan for each goal has then been subsequently drawn for its realization in the next five years. Similarly, an action plan within the same time frame was also drawn for each of the diocesan commissions and councils, clearly detailing the components, activities, financial requirement and the persons responsible for the plan's execution.²²

The whole exercise once again proved what was already felt even prior to the holding of the Pastoral Assembly, that is, the confidence that the diocese has already attained a certain degree of maturity and that it had the capacity to chart its own direction without much external *technical* help. More significantly, however, the gathering was yet again a concrete expression of the diocese's *vision* of deeper communion. Indeed, the collegial experience was at best "*kaboronyogan*" in action – once more.

¹⁹ See *CDL Report on Strategic Pastoral Planning*, Mater Ecclesiae Formation Center (Cadlan, Pili, Camarines Sur), March 21-23, 2011, p. 35-48.

²⁰ See *CDL Report*, p. 49, 79.

²¹ See *CDL Report*, p. 54.

²² See *CDL Report*, p. 55-78.