

The Making of A Local Church – A Lutheran Review of a Vatican II Classic

Colleagues,

You've already heard from me in recent days that Philippine Bishop Francisco Claver is coming to St. Louis next week, and that we Crossings folks here in town get a big chunk of his time. Today's ThTh post already begins the conversation as Crossings president Steve Kuhl reviews Claver's just-published book.

After 40 years as bishop in the Philippines and now 80 years of age, Claver has written a report of his own working theology with a bit of autobiography as well to show us readers how he got there. For a fuller picture check out this URL: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bclaver.html>

What makes Steve Kuhl THE one to review Claver's book you will learn in his opening paragraph. But what's almost hidden in Steve's later prose is the fact that for many years now he – with a Ph.D. under Bob Bertram – is a theology professor at Roman Catholic schools in Milwaukee. At first he taught at the archdiocesan seminary and now for some years at Cardinal Stritch University. So as he mentions below, he has been teaching the documents of Vatican II to Roman Catholics – seminarians, even! I still wonder how he gets away with that, but my guess is that with his title, Professor of Historical Theology, he is obviously "harmless." All he does is report on the history of things that happened – no argument there – and what the documents say that he and the students are reading.

But enough of that. Here's Steve's stunning review. By the time you get to his last few paragraphs you might just want to jump on a bus and come to St. Louis for next week's Crossings get-together with Claver. Steve plans to be in town too. So we can all listen in as the conversation continues. I wonder what Claver will say.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

“The Making of the Local Church” by Francisco F. Claver

Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008, ix, 192 pages, Paper, \$24.00

Reviewed by Steven C. Kuhl

Francisco F. Claver, S.J., is a Filipino Christian, a tireless pastor and a model bishop after the fashion of Vatican Council II. He is passionate about nurturing the faith of his flock so as to empower them to make a Christian difference in the world – that is, in the “locale” in which they live. The understanding of the view of church that he presents in this work not only challenges the thinking of many in his own Roman Catholic tradition, but gives much to consider for anyone who strives to connect the nature of the church to the mission of the church in a pastoral way.

I first met Cisco, as he is affectionately called, 25 years ago (in 1984) when he hosted a small band of Semine pilgrims for ten days at his East Asian Pastoral Institute at Ateneo Manila. (That visit was the impetus for Chapter 6 in Bob Bertram's book, “A Time for Confessing,” where Bertram unfolds how the “Philippine Revolution 1986” reflects marks of a confessing

movement by the way it “appeals to and for the oppressed.”) Those days were momentous times in Manila and they are briefly recounted in this work under the heading of “faith and ideology” (pp. 70-87). The atmosphere was thick with tension and the desire for change was palpable. Everywhere we went people flashed the sign of the “L” (index finger and thumb at right angles) and shouted “laban” (which meant “struggle”) indicating their support for the struggle AGAINST Marcos. Bishop Claver was a leading pastoral voice in this critical time, concerned not only with politics, but with authentic “evangelization”: the task of bringing the “faith of the Gospel,” as he likes to call it, into the Filipino situation in a meaningful way. What he came to realize in the process, as this book indicates, is that Rome (or any fixation on the idea of the “universal” church) can’t do that. Only a “local church” can bring the “faith of the gospel” into a local place like the Philippines. Just as there is no such thing as “the world,” sociologically understood, but only local cultures in “the world,” so there is no such thing as the “universal church,” pastorally understood, but only the local church being the “universal church,” the Church of Christ, in its locale. Hence, the task before him as a bishop was to “make the local church.”

In the “Making of the Local Church,” Claver tells the story of how the idea of the “Local Church” emerged, how it is an ever-evolving idea that is tied to the “action-reflection-action” model of doing theology (6-8, 160-63), and the challenges the idea encountered and still encounters within his own church tradition. The book, therefore, is not the end of the story but part of the story for an emerging idea (148-9). Methodologically, two things need to be noted up front. First, “orthopraxis” has priority over “orthodoxy,” not because “right thinking” isn’t important but because “right action,” making a difference in people’s lives or “doing the gospel,” as he likes

to say, is the ultimate aim of evangelization (65). Nevertheless, "orthopraxis" is not mindless. Christians reflect deeply ("orthodoxy") on what their actions say and do to others (56, 61-62). Therefore, the Latin American liberation theology idea of "conscientization" (59) is integral to Claver's method, though he has his critique of aspects of his Latin American colleagues, especially their equivocation on Marxist arguments for violent revolution. Second, Claver quite consciously sees himself more as a "cultural anthropologist" in terms of method than a traditional theologian, and is quite up front about that designation (6-7, 108-127). The reason for this is that faith and culture are always intertwined. Indeed, at the risk of oversimplification, the local church is always a correlation of faith and culture, where faith provides the "values" that get expressed in "culture." Here, in my judgment, one sees a very traditional Roman Catholic nature-grace paradigm of theology being translated into the language and outlook of cultural anthropology as exemplified in thinkers like Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973).

In Chapter 2 Claver sets out to give us a definition of what he means by "local church." The term itself has a complicated and controversial history, too complicated to go into here (See pp. 24-26, 148-9). Suffice it to say that the Roman Catholic tradition (at least since Trent) has usually spoken in terms of the "universal church" and the "particular" church, which were essentially hierarchical or juridical designations. The "universal church" (under the jurisdiction of the pope) was understood as the sum total of the "particular churches" (under the jurisdiction of a canonical bishop). The notion of the "local church" operates on a wholly different plane. The key feature of a "local church" is NOT a juridical connection to a place far away that governs what it means to be the church. Rather the local church is that community of faith that is

“bound to a definite geographical location within one linguistic and cultural area” (22). What characterizes it is that it is “responsible” (key concept), or at least should be allowed to be responsible, for translating the faith into the local culture because it alone has the potential or “competence” (30) to know the culture by virtue of the fact that its members are also members of the culture. Significantly, Claver sees the idea of the “local church” as having deep roots in the Christian tradition, giving a brief (if not caricatured) historical survey of how it manifested itself in every “age” of the church (21-24).

In Chapter 3, Claver shows how the idea of the “local church” has strong resonances with the Vatican II notion of the church as “communion.” Indeed, the whole of Claver’s argument is intended to flesh out the implications of Vatican II’s theology of church. As such, the book symbolizes the internal struggle within Roman Catholicism on what actually happened at Vatican II. Was it a real “aggiornamento” (=updating), the bringing in and renewing of things lost (like the idea of the local church, the priesthood of the faithful, principle of subsidiarity, etc.) that will help “update” the church’s evangelization in the modern age, as more “progressive” Roman Catholics, like Claver, claim? Or was it something less, a “kinder gentler” Roman Catholicism, to be sure, but not a substantially changed Catholicism? As a Lutheran living and working among Roman Catholics, I know how fierce “the battle for Vatican II” is, as Claver hints (9, 24-26). Having read and taught the documents, I also have my own sense of why the battle rages. The documents themselves, so it seems to me, often “give” with the left hand (progressives’ accent) only to “take it away” with the right hand (the traditionalists’ accent). The fly on the wall at Vatican II, Xavier Rennes (pseudonym), gives great insight into the debate behind the formulation of the documents (Vatican

Council II, Farrer, Straus, Giroux, Inc. and Orbis Books, 1996). Therefore, the debate often revolves around the spirit versus the letter of Vatican II. But I digress.

As I said, Claver sees a strong resonance between the VCII idea of church as communion and his idea of the local church. As communion, the church is to be understood as a “participatory” (and “communicative”) body at all levels and between all levels. (He has a detailed diagram and explanation of this on pp. 37-40.) Accordingly, whatever “structure” the church takes, and they may vary depending on cultural factors, those structures must serve the church as a participatory fellowship. Here is where Claver says that the practice of his Roman Catholic Church lags the Vatican II vision. The pre-Vatican II model was “consultative,” but not truly participatory or deliberative (29). That is, it did not truly bring the bishops, the priests, or the faithful into the decision-making process.

Significantly, Claver does not see a need to change the “hierarchical structure” of the church, per se (38). As a communion of communions the church exists on a grassroots to a global level, and their relationship may be conceived as being hierarchical. What is needed is a change of “culture” or “values” of those who work within the structures-specifically, a change to the values of “dialogue, participation, and co-responsibility” (88). Participatory versus non-participatory, therefore, is the criteria for judging any particular ecclesiastical structure (28, 38). However, Roman Catholics need both to embrace and to learn how to practice the value of participation that it retrieved, though in nascent form (40), at Vatican II. Importantly, for Claver, the notion of church as a participatory body does not mean that the church is a “democracy.” That’s because the notion of democracy fails to capture the idea that, at its most basic level, the church is a communion in the Holy Spirit, who guides and decides through the

participatory process (23, 37, 40, 143-44); a community of the Word which speaks through the Scriptures as they are studied and discussed (94-5).

However, Claver is not so sanguine as to think that as a participatory body the church will always make the right decisions. Mistakes will be made, indeed they have been made. Examples he raises up are birth control (48-9) and mandatory celibacy for clergy (146): birth control because that is a decision that should be left to the family; clerical celibacy because it should be left up to the local church. In both these cases the "sensus fidei," which is an "accepted 'locus theologicus' in traditional Catholic theology" has not been honored and given expression (145). Essentially, then, what marks a participatory community (immersed in the action-reflection-action method of deliberation) is that it is free to decide again when it discerns it has been wrong, even to the point of welcoming the prophet in its midst (37-8). Above all, the idea of a participatory church means for Roman Catholicism the end to what Claver calls the "infallibility syndrome," "the conviction that we must be right and correct at all times in what we say and do as church" (145). Above and beyond the value of being right is the value of faith in the Spirit to lead the participatory community into truth, over and over again.

Although in Claver's thinking the idea of the "local church" doesn't necessarily challenge the hierarchical nature of the church, it does significantly redefine what kind of ecclesial arrangements qualify as "church." Most important in this regard is the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) or Basic Christian Communities (BCC) as they are sometimes called (88-107). BECs have become an essential part of the Filipino and Latin American Church, both with regard to their "inward" (nurturing Christians in the faith of the gospel) and their "outward" (evangelization in their locale) impact (100-101). Yet their status as "church"

has been opposed at every level of the hierarchical church (101-103). One might say that the central thrust of Claver's work of "making the local church" consisted precisely in developing BECs. Therefore, he is adamant that they be seen as "church" in the full sense of the term because they truly embody the participatory nature of the "local church."

Central to Claver's defense of the BEC is his 8-fold definition. The BEC is "1) a community of believers 2) at the grassroots level, 3) which meets regularly 4) under the leadership of a lay minister 5) to express their faith in common worship 6) to discern on their common living of the faith 7) to plan and act on common decisions regarding their life of faith 8) in community, as community" (89). Of course, the objections are obvious. Chief among them is that because they lack a priest they lack a sacramental viability and centrality. But as Claver points out, these communities are Eucharistic centered. When a priest is available they have Mass, and if only the consecrated elements are available they have communion. The objection is a false one because "if the Eucharist is missing, it is due to the present legislation of the church restricting the number of priests of the Latin Rite to only celibate ones." If the BECs were allowed to have married priests, they would have them (104). It is not the fault of the BECs that they are bereft of the Eucharist, it is the fault of the hierarchical church for refusing to allow local solutions to be adopted by the local communities. As Claver argues, the BECs were essential to the "success" of the Philippine Revolution of 1986. For they provided space for the kind of Christian discernment that prevented the rural peoples of the Philippines from being duped by the ideologies of the left (Marxist) or the right (Marcos). Ministry of the BECs equipped them to think and act out clearly the faith of the gospel. For, as Claver writes,

"If there is anything that marks the BECs in their being and

acting, it is the centrality of faith-and faith that constantly returns to its source in Scripture for renewal and inspiration. It is the faith that brings their members together and sustains them in their praying and acting as community. And the sharing ethic we see they make much of only means that it is the charity of Christ that cements them as communities of faith. That faith, that charity-ecen without the Eucharist-are they not enough for solid ecclesiality?" (104)

Throughout the book Claver has been defining and making an argument for the idea of the "local church": not only because it resonates with the communion ecclesiology of Vatican II but because it provides a view of the church that connects the nature of the church to the mission of the church in a pastoral way. Because faith and culture correlate to make the local church, only the local church is fully competent for the task of evangelization, "the integrating of faith and life." This "integrating" is essentially Claver's soteriology, his understanding of what Christian salvation is all about. It goes under the name of "inculturation" and is described in lucid detail in Chapter 8 of his book.

In many ways, so it seems to me, Claver's understanding of Christian soteriology is rooted in the old scholastic nature-and-grace theological hermeneutic for understanding the Christian message, but now "updated" to correspond with insights from modern cultural anthropology. Faith in the gospel fulfills a basic need that is integral to good culture but which is lacking or waning in it. Obviously, those in the Crossings Community who are convinced of the historic Lutheran Law-and-Gospel hermeneutic for understanding the Christian message will have much to discuss with Claver in this regard. But our purpose here is to hear Claver out, and to do that we need to look at how Claver defines both "faith" and "culture."

As Claver begins this discussion he alerts us to the fact that he is approaching the task of inculturation from the viewpoint of a cultural anthropologist and not a theologian (108). The reason seems to be that the modern cultural anthropologist's definition of culture as a "people's [whole] way of life" actually provides a comprehensive view of human nature to which the supernatural gift of faith is added. As such, cultural anthropology seems to be setting the agenda for theology the way Aristotelianism set the theological agenda for Scholasticism. Culture as "the way of life of a people," therefore, provides a comprehensive picture of human nature: it is a way of using material things, of behaving, of speaking, of feeling, of thinking, of believing, of meaning, of valuing, and of symbolizing (110-111). The "deepest aspects of a culture," he tells us, "are its values" (112). It is from its values that its character flows. The problem stems from the fact that a culture's "actual values are not always congruent with the ideal values of the reign of God" (112). It is from those skewed values that injustice and oppression emerge, as exemplified in the extreme, for example, in the ideological battle between Marxist socialism and liberal capitalism (73-74).

As Claver sees it, the faith of the gospel is intended to speak precisely to this cultural malady. It's not that cultures do not already have the "seeds" of the values of the reign of God in them, "basic values like love, justice, kindness, mercy, compassion, family, and so forth," but that they are not yet "perfected by the values of faith" (109). They remain simply as seeds, not yet "blossoming out into real and living manifestations of the values of the gospel" (109).

"Inculturation, then, is the mutual enrichment of faith and culture. Culture is enriched in the refining process of its values that faith brings about: whatever is defective in the values of culture is corrected in their contact with faith, the

values becoming even more authentically human (and therefore divine) under the salvific influence of faith. Faith, on the other hand, is enriched by the novel ways of living and manifesting its values that culture brings about, since cultures are special ways of being human and those special ways can be enriching to the faith as they provide nuance to its living and understanding that otherwise would not be made" (109).

From this soteriological outlook, then, the major task of evangelization, that is, communicating the faith of the gospel, "is the bridging of the culture gap" (114). That happens in one of two ways depending on the cultural relation of the Preacher to the Hearer. If the Preacher and Hearer are from different cultures, the first moment of evangelization entails cultural analysis so that each person in the dialogue can begin to understand the "way of life" that forms the cultural screen through which they perceive. Once that gap has been overcome, the second moment of evangelization happens in which the Hearer and the Holy Spirit engage in a direct dialogue. This is a very important feature of evangelism for the preacher to know about. Significantly, evangelization is not simply a rational discourse about the nature of the world. Ultimately, it is the work of the Spirit, but a work that is always done in participation with the Preacher. Could this be a talking point between Claver and Luther's Small Catechism explanation of the third article of the creed?: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..."

If the Preacher and the Hearer are from the same culture, the nature of the first moment changes, says Claver. The screens are no longer cultural but, perhaps, of a psychological nature or a personality difference or differing kinds of life experiences. But like the culture gap when that gap is bridged the second moment begins in which the Hearer and the Holy Spirit engage in

a direct dialogue (115).

Of course, Claver is very aware of the objections that might arise from his equation of inculturation and evangelization, especially, the charges of syncretism and acculturation (118-19) that have periodically been leveled against missionaries by the Vatican, the latest of which is the document "Dominus Iesus," issued in 2000 (158). But in closing, let me raise two concerns in the interest of Christian dialogue and mutual understanding about the central soteriological concern of the Christian message and how it correlates with culture.

While I have much sympathy with a theology of culture approach to doing theology, nevertheless, so it seems to me, Claver's wholesale (if not acritical) use of the hermeneutical approach to culture as exemplified in thinkers like Geertz suffers on two grounds. First, it is profoundly reductionistic and second, it is far too sanguine about human nature and sin.

Concerning the second, Claver's approach is too sanguine about sin, first of all, from a sociological perspective. It ignores the significant work of critical sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists like Alvin Gouldner ("The Dark Side of the Dialectic"), Ernest Becker ("The Denial of Death"), and M. Scott Peck ("The People of the Lie"), respectively. Second, it is also far too sanguine about sin from a theological perspective because it ignores the long standing Catholic Theological Tradition of Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and Luther, to name a few, who all took seriously what is known as the doctrine of original sin. Indeed, outside of two references to sin—"The church's business is sin ... so it has to speak out against sin, against evil, against wrongdoing" (p. 80) and "The human part of the inculturation process, like all things human, will never be free of an element of sin" (120)-the subject plays no substantive role in either Claver's discussion of soteriology or his

discussion of the structure of the church.

Concerning the first, Claver's anthropological approach is reductionist in assuming that culture is purely a human construct. True, culture is a human construct, but not PURELY so. Unlike the human scientist who brackets the theological dimension of life, the theologian's task is precisely to elucidate the theological dimension. Accordingly, for the theologian, culture, like the creation as a whole, is a product, not of humanity "en se," but of humanity "coram Deo," humanity in relation to God. As such, culture needs to be looked at not only through the lens of the social sciences but also through the lens of the biblical message which means, as I would argue, the Law-Gospel hermeneutic that undergirds that message. True, culture is a "web of meaning" and a "value laden system," as cultural anthropologists assert. But even more importantly, for theological purposes, culture is also a "web of accountability," a reality wherein people not only hold one another accountable for their "whole way of life" but wherein God is holding them accountable too. Culture is essentially a "critical" phenomenon, a "lex semper accusat" phenomenon, a "lex talionis" phenomenon, an as-you-sow-so-shall-you-reap phenomenon. Although I can't go into detail here, nevertheless, interested persons can read more about this view of culture in my article "The Cross-Purposes of God in the Science and Politics of Food (from "Gospel Blazes in the Dark: A Festival of Writing Sparked in Honor of Edward H. Schroeder," The Crossings Community, Inc., 2005) [on the Crossings website at <https://crossings.org/book/GospelBlazes.shtml>].

If the first concern has to do with the "law of God" in human experience and culture, the second has to do with the "gospel of God" as experienced through Christian witness to the cross and resurrection of Christ. While it is true that Jesus exhibits many kinds of values as he encounters people in first century

Palestine, what is more important to note is the way he ASCRIBES value to people. His values and his method of ascribing value, PROPERLY SPEAKING, are not the values of the law, which, when confronting "the business of sin," ALWAYS condemns it. That is not to say that Jesus denies the importance of the role of the law in the human-divine encounter. On the contrary, Jesus is quite adept at using the law: Notice how he over and over again exposes hypocrites and silences his critics. But that is his ALIEN work. The PROPER work of Jesus is contrary to law. That work of Jesus "values" sinners in a way that they (accustomed only to the law's way of valuation) could never have imagined, unless they hadn't experienced it for the mselves-personally. Jesus values sinners by going to the cross, taking upon himself the death sentence that belongs to the them and, in return, giving them what they could never deserve, new life in his name. The proof that they are so valued is faith in Christ. Christian Theology calls that valuation by many names-mercy, salvation, justification, reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, etc. But however it is named, it comes about always only through the death and resurrection of Jesus. What surprised me in Claver's Chapter 8 on "Inculturation" is that that theme of the death and resurrection of Christ never appears. It surprised me because his description of the "orthopraxis" of the BECs sounded like "stauropraxis" to me, a praxis of the cross.

These comments aside, Claver offers up a feast of insight on the "making of the local church" from which every pastor and missiologist can benefit. I can think of nothing more promising and hopeful than the kind of participatory church he describes. It is precisely the kind of church where Christians can talk about the kind of issues I have raised here, and do so with Eucharist-the Holy Communion yes, but also with true thanksgiving for the partnership we share in the gospel.