

Pastoral possibilities in a Globalizing culture

A reflection on the Catholic Church in Singapore

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Introduction

Everyone must be getting a little tired of hearing the word globalization bandied about as the cause of all our ills and the hook on which we can hang all our economic and cultural uncertainties. In this paper I will attempt to do the following:

1. Pin down WHAT globalization means and its key players.
2. Discover a few of the pastoral challenges and possibilities facing us here in Singapore.

Part One

What can we say globalization means?

The International Monetary Fund who is one of the key players in the global economy defines globalization as:

“The growing interdependencies of countries worldwide through the increasing volume and variety of cross-border transactions in goods and services, international capital flows; and also through the rapid and wide spread diffusion of all kinds of technology.”

Features of Globalization

To unpack this definition a little we list some of the main **features of Globalization**:

- Globalization means that changes are rapid and numerous at a global level.
- Globalization relies on *trade*, investment and production across borders in such a way that their reference points are usually large conglomerates or Multinational Corporations (MNCs) whose economies are bigger than the nations involved. Free trade is touted as the answer to poverty.
- Nations are less and less the reference point in economic activity. Large financial institutions control the accumulation of wealth, which means that wealth is no longer created by production but rather by financial transactions.
- Globalization requires and builds up *Connectedness* through the World Wide Web – the Internet and email. The pace of communication and change in organizations has increased exponentially as a result of the instant nature of email and the Internet. Buying and selling money or stocks depends on information that is immediate and accurate.

- There is apparently a dominance of Western culture and values communicated through the Mass media and Internet. There is fear of the loss of local cultures and the *homogenization of culture*. This is particularly obvious when we look at the impact of Western popular music, the fast food industries and the global drink Coca Cola. The latest Harry Potter book sale of 10 million copies worldwide is another example.
- Globalization depends heavily on mobile and wireless *telecommunications*. Once again, business decisions are made anywhere in the world. Millions of dollars move in and out of countries with a phone call. SMS voting or telephone voting is the new tool for media shows like American Idol.
- *Information* is available immediately and in very large quantities.
- '*Simultaneity*' is another feature which means that even while the huge wave caused by the massive earthquake (*Tsunami*) on 26 December 2004 was still moving inland and causing destruction, pictures were being relayed by holiday makers using amateur equipment via internet and satellite broadcasting. The world's response to the tragedy was a great example of the power for good that resides in the media. In another case we witnessed the immense power of the media through the truly global grief and outpouring of affection covered incredibly well as Pope John Paul II lay dying and then during the funeral wake and services. Incredible because of the amount of media coverage given in so many countries, which do not profess any Christian sympathies and the grip, it had on the world. Pope John Paul II was a master of the media and appreciated more than most the power and goodness available to us through the media.

Global Capitalism

A key feature of Globalization is what is known today as Global capitalism. *Some aspects of global capitalism are:*

- According to global capitalism the *free market* is the ideal. Once trade is untrammelled and free, all will be well and all manner of things will be well according to the Liberal Capitalist pundits. The recent spat between the US and China over the tariffs imposed by the US on clothing from China is a case in point. The loudest promoter of the World Trade Organization, the US, is unable to cope with free trade and the impact on its local economy. However, they impose these impossible demands on poorer nations. Regulating the market is abhorrent to those who believe that a world free of all trade restrictions will bring widespread prosperity. The result has been more and more wealth in the hands of very few. There are many examples of unfair trade. Coffee, Sugar, Copper and the pineapple trade are some examples. Heavy tariffs are imposed on processed pineapple goods from Malaysia entering the US market but the same pineapples in their raw state can enter with a very low tariff. The tariff exists to protect the Hawaiian pineapple industry. Free trade should mean that ALL protectionist measures and subsidies are removed. This is a sticking point in both Europe and the US. The removal of the fixed price mechanisms on products like rubber and sugar will certainly benefit the growers and producers but it is a jungle of

legislations and small print with many countries backing down on promises once they come under pressure from their own people, whether farmers or manufacturers.

- Multinational and transnational corporations who benefit from an unregulated market have an extremely complex structure of ownership and a variety of businesses, which makes it impossible to pin down a person, or place that may be held accountable for paying taxes or for ensuring environmental safety. *Mergers and takeovers* are an everyday occurrence creating greater monopolies in food production and telecommunications for example.
- Another feature of global capitalism is the *instability of the job market*. Corporations have the 'right' to move to anywhere in the world where *labour* is cheaper and more disciplined. Since profit is the 'sacred cow' no one can question the shutting down of factories or plants in Europe or Singapore to move to China, Taiwan, Sri Lanka or other places where labour cheaper. All for profit is the mantra sung. Even when companies show healthy profits for shareholders they are laying off hundreds of workers in cost cutting exercises. The human rights question is subject to the profit margin.
- 'Outsourcing' country to country rides on the telecommunications revolution to bring cheap labour to our doorstep without the inconvenience of moving the workers. There is a debate raging in the US and Europe on the ethics of outsourcing since it is causing serious unemployment in certain sectors of the economy in the US and in Europe. Some countries of Europe have 10% of the population unemployed.
- *Currency trading* is the newest feature of Globalization. Banks, foreign exchange investors, fund managers and Insurance Companies speculate on exchange rate fluctuations with only one aim – to earn a profit. They have turned the world into a global casino. Trillions of dollars are moving in and out of countries these days with little reference to the actual value of manufacturing and services. People are now buying and selling money. There is a disconnect between actual goods and services. The uncontrolled movement of money causes huge fluctuations in the values of currency creating havoc for the local economies. This development in the world economy is one of the causes of the increasing gap between the few who are extremely rich and the many who can hardly find food for the day. The uncontrolled movement of money without regard to the local economies means that the poor subsidize the life-style of the rich by working to produce what they need at prices that are far below actual value.

Key players in increasing Globalization:

On the Economic front:

- *Global Institutions* like the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, The World Trade Organization. Their main role is to ensure the implementation of debt repayments, free market agreements etc. On the other hand they are not equipped to insist on the implementation of environmental protection agreements and the like.

- Regional and economic groupings like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation etc. These institutions shore up liberal capitalist beliefs in the free market, competition, free trade and currencies being commodified.
 - Oil money from OPEC and other oil producing countries was the main cause of the serious debt situation in many countries 20 years ago. European and American banks suddenly flooded with oil money were offering loans to countries with interest rates that were very attractive. When these countries borrowed the money most of it was wasted on arms, prestige projects or swallowed up by the wealthy elite who re-deposit much of the money back into these same banks. The poor end up repaying the loans through the restructuring programmes of the IMF with much higher interest rates. For many countries that have been paying their debts for many years they have only managed to pay the interest and never touched the capital. It is worth looking closely at this issue in order to determine which banks are involved so as to avoid supporting unethical systems.
- The United Nations and its agencies has a wider role to play by creating watchdog bodies to monitor security, refugees, food, health, education & human rights. Recent events have shown us that snubbing the UN carries no negative consequences if you are a superpower like the US.
 - It is good to highlight here as an example the benefits of the UN as a global health monitor because of the vulnerability created by the massive trade in animals for food markets and the rise of diseases like the Avian Flu and SARS.

On the Cultural front

- Global Telecommunications & Media Corporations, Television & Film making networks, Players on the World Wide Web (internet service providers) are the purveyors of progress and values. Everyone can now be a player who has access to the Internet. With the development of cable TV and digital technology choices for entertainment have increased together with a revolutionized way of thinking about communication on websites, in chat rooms, ICR, video conferences, email and the like.
- The question is, who is providing the entertainment, news and information and what is the effect? We see in the worldwide franchise of American Idol a powerful combination of clever marketing to the young, the media giants combining with the mobile phone companies and American Idol owners laughing all the way to the bank. To be a star today you really need a good media patron and agent. The rest like good old-fashioned talent and having a musical career are old hat.
- The access to information on the web also means that political parties, rebels or oppressed groups can make their cause known through the internet making it more difficult for the local authorities to control the situation or kill off the opposition. The recent signature campaign against the NKF is an illustration of this.

On the Religious & Political front

- **World religions** like Christianity and Islam with adherents in almost every country and with interconnections play a vital role in the globalization process. If there is to be reduction in poverty, a cessation of terrorism and globalizing of solidarity the world religions have to behave like the global entities they are and use their influence for the good.
- **Regional alliances** like the European Union, ASEAN or APEC where security, cultural and economic ties are fostered for mutual benefit.
- **Fundamentalist terror networks** as well as fundamentalist movements within, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam & Judaism.
- **Transnational Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**. Examples of these NGOs are those who protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, those who protect the environment and those who resist the WTO free trade policies and protest the 'free market' ideology. There are groups like Greenpeace who have a universal following and work across borders on global issues concerning Nuclear disarmament and toxic substance disposal. Organizations like 'Medicin sans Frontier' and the Jesuit Refugee service are other examples of how NGOs serve to monitor and limit negative globalizing influences.

Moving On

There is no point in hankering for the good old days when we had the so-called 'Kampong' spirit. Or when people were obedient to authorities; when families seemed stronger; children played happily with an old stick and bicycle tire and people wrote letters with fountain pens. We are way past the time when you knew the person whom you bought your tea or coffee from. Even national sovereignty needs to be reviewed in the light of economic globalism. Great opportunities lie waiting for us in this age of globalization which will pass us by if we are gone missing into our backyards to bemoan the present time.

Part Two

Pastoral challenges and possibilities

Faith / Life division

The two most serious pastoral problems we face are –firstly, the gap that exists between what we say we believe and our actual daily lives and secondly, the content that people think constitutes their religion. We are not alone in having these problems.

The global realities of high finance & investment, access to information, questions of labour, tourism and trade etc which is the stuff of our daily lives are often considered totally unrelated to the practice of faith and discipleship as a Christian. Many Catholics still believe that sexual morality is the only thing they have to get right while ignoring their poor business practices. Do we believe ourselves that there is a problem here?

Where do we begin to address this problem?

First of all we may need to examine the way we pray, the content of our prayer and worship and the content of our *formation* programmes. Let us submit ourselves to some kind of external evaluation or 'audit' to check our blind spots. For example, the social teachings of the Church on economics, politics, marriage and family life remain unknown to the vast majority of us Catholics in spite of pleas from the Popes and Bishops to correct this shortcoming. Discussions or courses pertaining to good business practices or human rights hardly draw any interest. On the other hand, discussion on what is allowed and not allowed in the Mass draws huge interest. I am not saying that we should be sloppy in our liturgical celebrations but the concern is that the sense of urgency to live out the Eucharist is weak.

It is clear to anyone who visits groups in parishes or who reads the materials that are circulating among Catholics in Singapore that our interests are largely pious & devotional. This is not bad in itself but if it is perpetuating the gap between faith and life and turning us into nagging petitioners, then we have to be worried. The good news is that there is at present a growing number of lay persons who are actively seeking to relate their faith to economic, political & life issues.

Singapore is an important centre for financial transactions, investment strategies and currency trading. Singapore is reinventing itself to become the bio-technological hub especially in Stem-Cell research. Singapore is also adopting many of the life-style practices of the developed world with the sharp increase in the number of spas, anti-aging treatments, ultra-luxurious living and travel. We need to find a place for ourselves to dialogue on these areas in an effort to bring the Gospel to bear on the whole of our lives. Lay Catholics involved in the world should be part of a faith reflection and research that will strengthen our discipleship and stewardship.

An inculturated message

The mission of the church is to evangelize. We have to express the Good News in a language that people find compelling. Does the message thrive on our local soil?

Our first consideration is how our message is affected by the trends of globalization.

There is a kind of blindness created by globalization, which makes us believe that everyone understands English, everyone appreciates our way of worshipping or reaching out. It's the same when we make statements like 'everyone has a mobile phone' or 'everyone has an email address.' We exclude hundreds if not thousands of people as though they do not count. Our 'everyone' does not include them. For example, it may seem obvious that the music, the clothes, the food and the life-style are the same everywhere but a deeper look reveals a much more complex reality. Homogenization of culture is actually happening mainly among a certain group of middle class younger people across the globe who have money in their pockets besides their mobile phone or PDA. This is a growing number but by no means universal.

This 'blindness' created by the hype of globalization gives rise to the serious problem of 'exclusion' of many people in different economic and cultural spheres. Our message must be INCLUSIVE.

Some researchers have found that in fact what is happening is that imported music and values are adopted in ways that gives expression also to the local culture. Some writers call this '*glocalization*'.

Many examples of this can be found in the Chinese and Indian film industries. In the Chinese Popular Music industry too they have managed to keep a good deal of its Asian flavour while adopting many cultural 'Hip Hop' features from the American and European scene. On the negative side, in the recent wars in Eastern Europe in the Slovak and Serb nations those doing the killing were wearing Nike shoes and Levi Jeans. Genocide or 'ethnic cleansing' is not an American value! The cultural transfer remains very superficial. What about us? What values have we really imbibed?

Can we 'glocalize' the church so that people can identify more easily with the message and feel a stronger sense of belonging? Can we inculturate the message of the Gospel so that the local people can hear it in words and gestures that they can understand in their hearts?

To take this point further let us learn something from the multi-cultural 'melting-pot' experience of the American people. An interesting point was made regarding the reason American culture spread so easily and is so widely accepted which may have relevance for Singapore to a smaller degree.

According to one writer, the multi-cultural input or melting together of the Irish, African and Hispanic together with other European and Asian flavours in the United States, created a cultural product many people are able to identify with. American pop culture carries the strains of African, Celtic and Asian music, history and drama.

This is a very important detail when considering what the Church in Singapore can do for the future of the Gospel Message. In Singapore, Christianity is the only religion that is not directly linked to a particular ethnic group. It is a 'melting-pot' arena for cultural and faith expression and can be a binding factor in creating a local Singaporean faith culture. This would entail however,

- becoming much more aware of the cultural and language diversity present in our congregations;
- this would mean that more time and effort be put into the development of multi-lingual Small Christian Communities where people can use many languages to share their faith and support each other.
- It would also mean becoming more conscious of the potential for a fusion of local, Asian music and arts with the Western forms, in the church and in the liturgy. The dominance of European and American expressions of faith may not see us into the future. Instead the church will be viewed as a foreign element and sidelined as irrelevant as in many other Asian countries.

The call of the Church today to dialogue with people of all faiths is a pastoral challenge we are not yet equipped to face. Here in Singapore, by the nature of our society we live side by side with people of all faiths. They are often members of our family. There is a dialogue going on whether or not we are aware of it. We need to develop the skills in our families and work places to articulate our faith in language that is

respectful and simple in order to share hope and to communicate at a level that is deeper than our daily SMS short cuts. The Small Christian Communities can be a good forum for this type of formation for dialogue among the laity.

The Good News on the World Wide Web

Our second consideration relates to our 'connectedness' through the media and Internet. When Jesus walked on this earth he used the well-made Roman roads to get around. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, when the persecution began with the stoning of Stephen outside Jerusalem most of the Apostles fled using the well-paved roads laid by the Roman Empire. We know that the Good News traveled to Ethiopia via the Queen's treasurer, thanks to Phillip who was on that road. Today, the information highway can become the carrier of Good News in the same way. We have a choice, we can allow the media to give us a continuous beating over the sexual abuse scandals and money related scandals within the church, or we can ride the back of this wild horse of the internet, television, telecommunications to harness its potential to put across our message of hope and life.

For this to happen we would need :

- Catholic professionals and facilities to put Gospel values at the forefront of media. IT specialists and web designers should take some theological and religious studies in order to put across the message of Christ in the language of today.
- There is a need to think of ourselves as a global entity and to work in close collaboration with regional and international networks in Church & society to ensure that the right message gets across.

Mobilizing energies for Solidarity

Our third consideration is to view ourselves seriously as having a role to globalize solidarity.

The Catholic Church knows very well about globalization. She has been 'globalized' for a very long time. We have to admit that in the past there was some abuse of its global position to gain political and material power. This was especially so during the time of the Catholic Kings & Queens of Spain, Portugal, France and England when wars were fought in the name of God and colonizing powers were supported and ministered to by the Church.

Today, the Church is seen much more as a global moral authority and one that favours the solidarity of the human race. The voice of the Church has often been raised against poverty and many other life-threatening forces. (Unfortunately what we preach is not always what we practice.)

In the Church in Singapore we are typical of an island state – inward looking and rather parochial. Transnational cooperation and research on a wide range of issues is urgently needed. There are wonderful movements and structures within the Church that can be exploited in favour of the poor or the

disenfranchised but these voices are still very weak. With the recent Tsunami crisis we have demonstrated the power of a global response by religious groups and nations.

Especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has taken advantage of information and travel liberalization. The price of travel and communication is a fraction of what it was 20 or 30 years ago. Today, the Church is organized into Conferences of Bishops who form federations like the Asian bishops (FABC). The bishops of the world meet every 2 years for what is called a 'SYNOD' where the church leadership meets to discuss issues that pertain to the whole body.

The offices of FABC reflect the modern age in the way that offices have chairmen who are not in the same country or city as their secretaries. The office of laity bishop is in India; the offices are spread between India and Taiwan. Travel is cheaper, telecommunications, video conferencing, email etc make meetings less necessary and decisions as well as information are relayed instantly to the whole network.

There are many regional commissions and committees for the Integrated Pastoral Approach, Catechetics, social communications, bible, migration and inter-religious dialogue, to name a few. The infrastructure is available and in place but church people in Singapore often do not see the need or relevance of these offices and networks to the local church.

A grassroots pastoral approach

Our last consideration concerns the need to relate and communicate with people on issues that matter to them.

Our parish pastoral plans are often the fruit of a gathering of like-minded people who speak the same language and have the same economic status. In parishes, many are trying to improve on this situation through more representative parish assemblies, councils and committees. We believe in consultation. There are a few time honoured pastoral practices that are irreplaceable if consultation is to be genuine.

Firstly, is the **personal contact** with people through home visits or the reaching out through small groups. The need for privacy, the strong individualism engendered by urban living and the lack of family life have led to higher numbers of people losing their sense of belonging, losing their self-esteem and identity. Personal contact can combat the loneliness experienced in crowded places and is urgently needed even if not always wanted. There are myriad problems in visiting people today – the situation of mixed marriages, the hours people work and so on. In spite of all the difficulties, whatever can be done should be done.

The feedback that one can get from being in someone's home and listening to them has a beneficial effect because it also develops in the pastoral leadership - compassion and pastoral care that cannot be taught. The visiting has to be systematic and impartial for this to take place.

Secondly, a deeper understanding of the **impact of urban living** is needed. Studies have been scarce on the effects of noise, confinement and lack of privacy that common corridors engender in low cost housing complexes; The impact on women who are exposed to this form of life more than their spouses who

leave for a work environment each day - Research shows that women are still the main carers of young children and elderly in Singapore.

Coming from the perspective of 'table fellowship' it would be important to understand the role of food centres and shopping malls in family life? Are the long working hours inevitable in Singapore? What kind of secularism is creeping into our society?

Thirdly, it is commonly believed that neighbourhoods are not a viable reality for Small Christian Communities because of the mobility and business demands of our people. This assumption should be seriously examined in terms of actual families and individuals. Perhaps some new way of understanding neighbours can be developed if Small Christian Communities are to serve the people. This may also require that parishes become more fluid in their understanding of boundaries so that someone who attends Sunday Mass in the West would be encouraged to belong to a neighbourhood group in the East where they live or work. It would be good to hear from the people in the 'heartlands' on this issue.

There are many exciting possibilities if we decide to collaborate on many fronts. Small beginnings are immediately possible while the larger initiatives may take a little longer to implement. Our tools for pastoral planning in Singapore need to be sharpened or the gap between our parish life and life everyday will widen and our faith disconnected and meaningless to our lives.

Sunday, July 17, 2005.

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