

The Experiences of the Members of Basic Faith Community (BFC) of San Isidro Labrador Parish, Virac, Catanduanes

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Abstract

This study explores the Basic Faith Community Experience of San Isidro Labrador Parish in Virac, Catanduanes. It also identifies the personal, spiritual and community life of the members prior to and after joining the Basic Faith Community (BFC).

The primary data were gathered from documents of the diocese, parish priest, priests directly involved in the New Evangelization Pastorate/Basic Faith Community Program; and key informants. The key informants are members of the BFC, and data were obtained through survey questionnaire and focus group discussions.

Results of the study show that all the key informants experienced a change in their attitude and behavior after joining BFC. After several years of attending BFC, the members' personal concerns and worries shifted from materialistic concerns to God-centered concerns. Hence, their spiritual lives improved remarkably. Their BFC experiences remodeled their concept of God, resulting in a change of their philosophy, values and actions. Furthermore, all key informants became conscious of their role as Christians.

The parish has to sustain and, if possible, put prime importance in establishing and nurturing Basic Faith Communities above all other para-liturgical activities.

Keywords: Basic Faith Community, experience, personal life, spiritual life, community life, dialogue, culture, and faith

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Introduction

Culture is the locus of religion, the soil where religion thrives, which nourishes and gives religion its distinct and vibrant colors. Individuals exteriorize their faith in God within their cultural milieu, opening the way for diversity and multiplicity in religious expressions. The Catandunganons, the people of Catanduanes, are not exceptions as they have been expressing their Christian faith in their cultural context for centuries. This phenomenon, impels one to look into their historico-cultural background.

A. The Province

1. Geography

Catanduanes is a mango-shaped island at the eastern part of the Philippines. The Maqueda Channel separates it from the Bicol peninsula and is surrounded by the waters of the Pacific Ocean. Topographically, the province is highly mountainous with numerous pockets of small valleys, countless streams, waterfall, river systems, virgin beaches of varying sizes and shapes, bays, and coastal plains. Catanduanes has eleven municipalities. Among the 7,107 islands of the Philippines, Catanduanes is the 12th largest, with a size of 1,843 sq. kms. Hence, it is larger than the provinces of Marinduque, Bataan, Cavite, La Union, and Batangas.

2. The Culture of the Catandunganons at the Time of Spanish Arrival

Oral tradition traces the origin of the name of the province from the word “tandu,” a species of a beetle in the province. People not native to the place called the province “Catanduan” meaning, “Land of the Tandus.” However, in Father Juan Francisco de San Antonio’s 1738 account of the name of the province, the term “Catandungan” was derived from a river’s name. In the early years of Spanish colonization, the province was called “Isla de Cobos,” (thatched huts, ‘kubo’) the dwellings of the natives seen by the Spanish colonizers. These colonizers of the island encountered well-established communities with inhabitants almost having the same culture with Visayans and Tagalogs. They hunted, tilled, fished, mined gold, did carpentry, traded with other islands, and boasted skilled shipbuilders who impressed Antonio de Morga, a 16th-century Spanish writer.

The Catandunganons were also very good at seafaring. Antonio de Morga, in his *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, wrote that when the galleon Santo Tomas was shipwrecked in May 1601 in the coastal waters of Catanduanes, the crew was able to reach Manila along with their precious cargoes with the help of the natives.

Sources likewise narrated the Catandunganons were friendly and sociable. The men were tattooed and they drank locally produced wine and brandy from the palm trees that abundantly grew in the island. The women were industrious. Besides their chores at home, they also helped in farming and in fishing. They adorn themselves with flowers, jewelry and wore beautiful clothes. They were modest and aware of proper hygiene, for they would take a bath every day and never drank water from the river.

The inhabitants’ religious beliefs, practices and customs of the island were the same as those of the Visayans. They “worshipped nature spirits, gods of particular localities

or activities, and their own ancestors.” The Catandunganons, respected both priest/priestess and practitioners of witchcraft.

3. The Christianization and Hispanization of the Province: An Overview

In 1573, Juan de Salcedo, a Spanish conquistador during his pacification campaigns in the Bicol region, reached the island of Catanduanes and subjugated the natives. Between 1582 to 1583, an alcalde-mayor representing the Spanish crown was already in charge of the island and was aided by a treasurer and a notary, both of whom were appointed by the alcalde-mayor.

The island was divided into four encomiendas and were administered by Tomas Dato Rodrigo Sarfate, Juan de Yepes and Anton Sanchez. The natives were good tribute payers, for they paid in full and more than what was required of them.

The earliest direct contact with the Christian religion by the islanders occurred when Augustinian missionaries headed by Fr. Diego de Herrera, while on board the Galleon Espiritu Santo, were shipwrecked at the coast of Batalay, Bato on April 23, 1576. The survivors were hospitably welcomed by the natives by providing them with food and shelter. Eventually, the friars set out in preaching the Gospel and taught the natives of new ways of farming and improving their ways of living. The natives accepted everything except the new faith. To avoid conversion they transferred to nearby forests. The Spaniards tried to bring them back to Batalay for they were running out of food supplies. The natives stubbornly refused and they attacked and killed the survivors of Espiritu Santo, including Fr. Diego de Herrera. The lone survivor, Gregorio Galvez, buried his companions and placed a wooden cross on Fr. Herrera’s grave.

The actual Christianization of the province occurred before the end of the 16th century when Franciscan missionaries came and converted the inhabitants to Christianity. Building of churches followed in strategic places. One was built in Pandan town, in 1650. Another one was founded in Caramoran, in 1660, and two more churches were constructed in Viga (Biga) in 1681, and in Panganiban (Payo) in 1683. And the last one was constructed in Virac (Birac), the capital of Catanduanes, in 1771.

At first glance visitors of the place can say that Christianity is deeply entrenched in the province as chapels are seen almost in every street. But as they observe longer, they will notice that animistic pre-colonial beliefs are practiced. People still consult an albularyo (native curer) for healing, and protection. Furthermore, the locals believe in the existence of supernatural beings and witchcraft practitioners.

The first Diocesan Pastoral Consultation Seminar held on April 7-11, 1975 pointed out that “popular religiosity” characterizes the Christian religion in the province.

B. The New Evangelization and Basic Faith Community: An Overview

The Basic Faith Community (BFC) is the fruit of the first Synod of Virac that discovered that Christianity in the province is “the product of culture and convention” rather than “the result of a personal and conscious decision for Christ.” It succinctly

admitted that the Diocese in the recent past had fallen short of giving priority to kerygma proclamation, which resulted in “dormant faith” prevailing in the entire province. The late Rev. Fr. Msgr. Jose Molina the author of the BFC) echoed the same in June 2000, and shared how frustrating it was on his part in exhausting every method he knew to bring people to God for several decades but without much success. He pointed out that his failure was his inability to shepherd the parishioners towards ontological holiness. The Diocese, finally found the answer in CCC 1231, which mandates every Church to conduct post-baptismal initiation which gives emphasis on proclaiming the word of God to the catechumens and on developing a personal acceptance of Christ as his Lord and Savior. It is hoped that through this, the dormant faith of baptized Catholics will become fully alive and active.

As of the writing of this research, the New Evangelization Pastoral (NEP) and Basic Faith Community (BFC) remain the main thrusts of the Diocese of Virac in the New Millennium.

C. A Brief History of San Isidro Labrador Parish

The church and convent of the Parish is located in Barangay Magnesia (formerly known as Mag-on-on) which is 15 kilometers away from Virac. Because of its big population, the place is divided into two: Magnesia del Norte and Magnesia del Sur. Its inhabitants have always shown a distinct zeal for living the Christian faith, making the barangay (village) the seat of religious activities and celebrations where people from nearby barangays converge to join such festivities. Their strong faith led them to building a chapel in 1700.

On May 2, 1956, a year after Virac was founded as a parish, His Excellency Flaviano B. Ariola D.D., passed a decree making Magnesia a parish under the tutelage of San Isidro Labrador. The parish serves nine barangays, namely: Buenavista, Hawan, Batag, Casoocan, Marilima, Calompong, F. Tacorda, Balete, and Magnesia—the seat of the parish.

On May 15, 2006, the parishioners celebrated the 50th founding anniversary of their parish, emphasizing on evangelization as the center of the pastoral programs of the parish. The parish is one of the first recipients of the new pastoral thrust of the Diocese, and holds the reputation of having the most successful and fruitful BFC program in the Vicariate of Virac.

The Problem

The main objective of this study is to explore and analyze the experiences of some members before and after joining the Basic Faith Community.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons of the members for joining the BFC?
2. What are the experiences of the members before and after joining BFC in the following areas:
 - 1.1. Personal life: concerns, worries and relationship with other people;
 - 1.2. Spiritual life: belief in God or image of God and prayer life;
 - 1.3. Community life: involvement in any group or association?
3. What are the changes in attitude by the BFC members based on their experiences?
4. What are the most helpful activities of BFC?
5. What are the suggestions of BFC members?

Significance of the Study

1. This study is important to future researchers in the fields of sociology, anthropology, ecclesiology and missiology, and those who are interested in filling the wide chasm of scholarly works about the way of life of the Catandunganons.
2. This will provide the Diocese with empirical data that will immensely help the priests, religious and lay people who are active in the evangelization to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the NEP/BFC, hopefully making them greatly sensitive and aware of the spiritual needs of the people. Should this awareness be raised, it is expected that they will be more effective evangelizers and agents of renewal, as envisioned by the Catholic Church in the Second Plenary Council.
3. The importance of this research also lies in the fact no other study has ever been conducted about the NEP/BFC. And since the NEP/BFC is the local church's first conceived program that radically altered the doctrinal approach, there is a great necessity to look into it.
4. Other dioceses and parishes experiencing religious crisis (inactive Christian faith) may adapt the NEP/BFC and gain valuable insights.

Theoretical Framework

This research, adopted the 4-Phase Model of New Evangelization Pastoral of the Diocese of Virac and John Fuellenbach's Elements for Evangelization to explain the phenomenon under study.

4-Phase Model of NEP

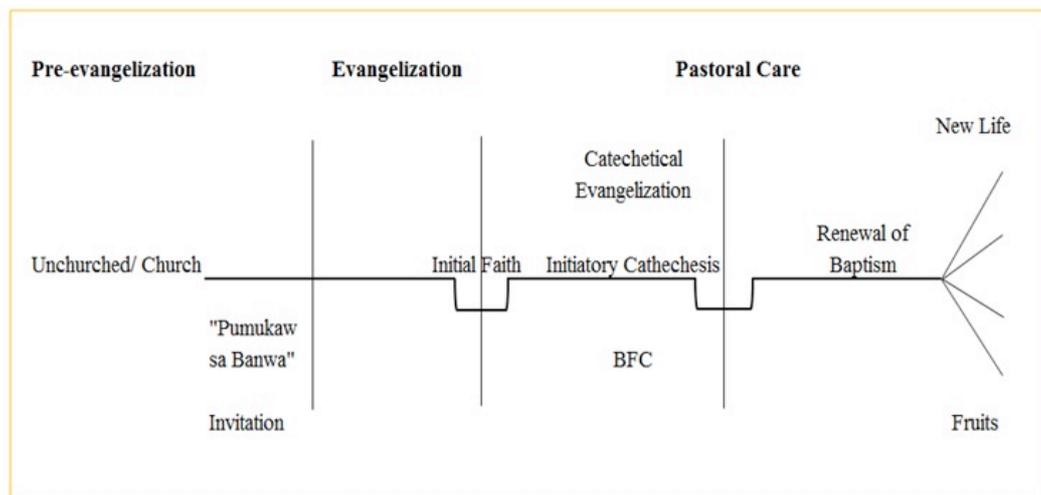


Figure 1 4-Phase Model of New Evangelization Pastoral

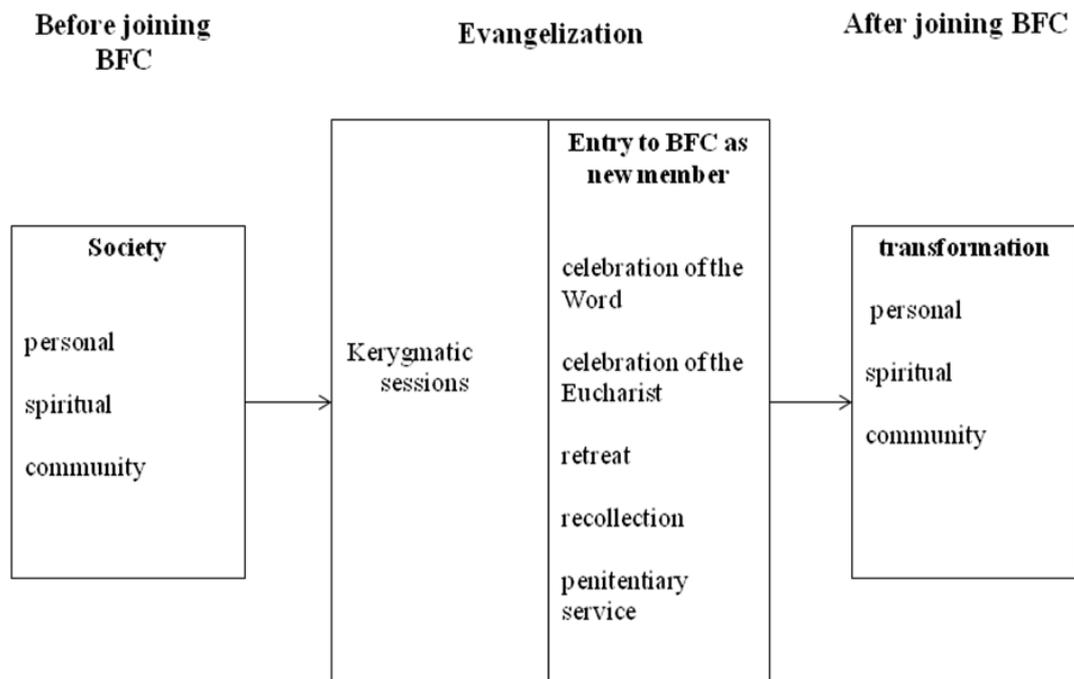
The First Phase is Pre-evangelization, wherein the local church invites both the unchurched and church individuals to participate in the orientation of the New Evangelization Pastoral (NEP). The Second Phase is evangelization wherein kerymatic sessions are given to the attendees and it is expected that they would have an “initial faith”. This initial faith impels them to make a personal commitment to join the Basic Faith Community (BFC). The Third Phase is initiatory catechesis. In this phase, evangelization is continuously given including catechesis. The Fourth Phase is Pastoral Care wherein the mature Christian faith resulting from membership in the BFC is nurtured. This faith maturity and nurturing eventually leads to renewal of baptism and new life in Christ.

The Basic Faith Community(BFC) being the setting for making one’s faith in Christ mature, is the way of socialization from the side of the local church towards the realization of the vision-mission of PCP-II and that of the Diocese’s: to have a Church for the poor, thereby building a civilization of life and love.

The well known theologian, John Fuellenbach identified three fundamental elements for evangelization which further enhanced the understanding of the experiences of the BFC members. One of these is Koinonia (Community). Which means that members have a sense of belongingness and interdependence, sharing a deep personal relationship with Christ and other members, having one heart and one mind. Another one is Diakonia (Service/Mission) which means that all members must think of each other’s interest. Everyone must be united in their desire to help the members, particularly the less-fortunate. And another indispensable one is Kerygma (Preaching) which means that the Good News of Christ must be proclaimed to all, so that they will come to know Christ and His unfathomable love and the real purpose of their existence on Earth. A community of believers is an evangelized and evangelizing community. It is important to mention that there are theologians and Christian writers who identified Leutergia (Worship) equally essential in evangelization. Hence, this is also included in this study as one of the elements for evangelization. Leutergia

(Worship) which means that members of the community celebrate the mystery of faith and the Eucharist. In this event, the believers regularly gather without fail in memory of Christ and celebrate God's presence through the Sacraments and the Word.

Research Paradigm



The Research Paradigm shows the first box that presents the entrants, who are the key informants who are governed by their own personal, spiritual and community concerns. Their social environment affects their way of life. The society, being a human product, is unstable and is subject to constant change. Instability in the society brings stress on the members, impelling them to search for meaning amidst life difficulties and confusion. The next stage shows the Diocese of Virac's response to changes by conceiving the New Evangelization Pastoral. It aims to awaken the dormant faith of the people and nurture this faith to maturity through the Basic Faith Community (BFC). This is carried out through inviting and giving orientation to parishioners. The socialization of the individuals start upon their initial entry to the BFC and by their attendance to the kerygmatic sessions therein. Their socialization continues as formal members. They adopt the concepts, values and way of life of the community by participating in its activities, such as the Celebration of the Word. It is expected that through this socialization process, transformation will take place upon the, enabling them to cope with the changes around them as followers of Christ

Scope and Limitation

This study focused on the experiences of the members of the BFC of San Isidro Labrador Parish, Virac, Catanduanes. And these experiences were explored and analyzed in the following areas: personal, spiritual, and community life. The respondents in this study were all residents in the territory of San Isidro Labrador Parish, Virac, Catanduanes.

Research Design and Methodology

This research is descriptive-qualitative in nature. It describes, explores and analyzes the personal, spiritual and community life of some members of BFC. It employed key- informant approach, fielded open-ended questionnaire to the key informants and conducted a focus-group discussion on the same key informants.

Subjects of the study

Batag-BFC was chosen as the locus of this research. In this community, there are twenty-seven active members, and from these twenty-seven members, there were twelve key informants who passed the criteria set. The total number of respondents for this study consists of the 44.44 % of the total population of Batag-BFC, more than the twenty percent required for a qualitative research.

The criteria for choosing key informants for the BFC:

1. Have been members for at least 3 years,
2. Have been actively involved in church activities or in the parish (elder, lector or commentator, catechist, choir on Sunday or daily mass and other activities related to evangelization, like inviting those who are not yet members of BFC)
3. Have been regularly attending the weekly celebrations of the Word and other religious activities of the BFC

Table 1

Summary of Socio-Demographic Profile of Key Informants

<u>Variable respondent</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Length of Membership</u>	<u>Educational Attainment</u>	<u>Civil Status</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
1	14	F	3	H.S.	Single	Student
2	16	F	3	H.S.	Single	Student
3	21	F	6	College	Single	Brgy. Councilor
4	22	F	7	College	Single	Catechist
5	28	F	7	H.S.	Married	Catechist
6	29	M	7	Bs.Educ.	Single	Catechist
7	33	F	7	College	Married	Catechist
8	37	F	3	College	Married	Catechist
9	39	F	4	College	Married	DayCare Tchr.
10	42	F	7	H.S.	Married	Housewife
11	48	F	5	H.S.	Married	Bgy.Councilor
12	53	F	6	Elem.	Married	Housewife

Statistical Tools

Content analysis is used in explaining data from the open-ended questions. The use of frequency count, mean and percentage helped in the realization of descriptive analysis. Mean was computed using the following formula:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

X = Mean

Σ x = the sum of scores

N = Total Population

Upon the tabulation of the data, they were analyzed and interpreted in compact form.

Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Data

Data presentation proceeded in the order of the indentified statement of the problem.

Table 2

Reasons for Joining the BFC

<u>Reason for Joining</u>	<u>Freq.</u>
Parish Campaign/invitation	3
Invited by Parish Priest	1
Inspired by Homily of parish priest& teachings of BFC elders	1
Attended Celebration of the Word	2
Inspired by sibling	1
Influenced by peers	1
Invited by elders/member of BFC	3

The table shows that the key informants joined because they had been invited by the parish priest, sibling, friend and by the elders or members of BFC, inspired by parish campaigns and witnessed celebration of the Word.

Table 3

Concerns of Key Informants Before and After Joining the BFC

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>
material things	3	0
Job	2	0
power/social status	2	0
personal comfort	2	0
Simplicity	0	3
basic needs	2	0
spiritual dev't. of others	0	3
spiritual matter/spiritual service	3	10
family welfare	6	5
reconciliation		1
holistic concern		1
serve others		3
Education	2	1
proclaim Word of God		1

*Frequency exceeded the total population of key informants due to multiple answers.

Table 4

Key Informants' Worries

Categories	Before	After
material things	3	0
Job	2	0
power/social status	2	0
personal comfort	2	0
Simplicity	0	3
basic needs	2	0
spiritual dev't. of others	0	3
spiritual matter/spiritual service	3	10
family welfare	6	5
reconciliation		1
holistic concern		1
serve others		3
Education	2	1
proclaim Word of God		1

Tables 3 and 4 show that before joining the BFC, most of the respondents primary concern and worry was their family which motivated them to desire for material things. Their secondary concern and worry were social status, health, personal comfort and their service to God. Only two respondents had no worries. After joining the BFC, the primary concern of some respondents shifted to spiritual. Although are still thinking of the welfare of their family they are neither worried nor anxious or they have less worry.

Table 5

Key Informants' Descriptions of Relationships with Others

Categories	Before	After
material things	3	0
Job	2	0
power/social status	2	0
personal comfort	2	0
Simplicity	0	3
basic needs	2	0
spiritual dev't. of others	0	3
spiritual matter/spiritual service	3	10
family welfare	6	5
reconciliation	0	1
holistic concern	0	1
serve others	0	3
Education	2	1
proclaim Word of God	0	1

Table 5 shows that before joining BFC, the respondents' relationship with other people was limited only to interacting with their family, relatives and close friends. After joining, they have become more patient, understanding, considerate, generous, humble, forgiving and peace loving. However, communication with family members is not open yet.

Table 6

Image of/Belief about God

Categories	Before	After
material things	3	0
Job	2	0
power/social status	2	0
personal comfort	2	0
Simplicity	0	3
basic needs	2	0
spiritual dev't. of others	0	3
spiritual matter/spiritual service	3	10
family welfare	6	5
reconciliation	0	1
holistic concern	0	1
serve others	0	3
Education	2	1
proclaim Word of God	0	1

Table 6 shows that before joining the BFC, majority of the respondents' concept and experience about the presence of God was characterized and permeated either by folk religiosity or popular religiosity. After joining the BFC, the respondents' belief in God or image of God shifted to biblical understanding.

Table 7

Key Informants' Motivation for Praying

Categories	Before	After
material things	3	0
Job	2	0
power/social status	2	0
personal comfort	2	0
Simplicity	0	3
basic needs	2	0
spiritual dev't. of others	0	3
spiritual matter/spiritual service	3	10
family welfare	6	5
reconciliation	0	1
holistic concern	0	1
serve others	0	3
Education	2	1
proclaim Word of God	0	1

Table 7 shows that the change in the respondents' image of God has an effect in their prayer life and attitude towards God, such as giving greater weight on the value of the Word of God by reading the Holy Bible and by meditating on the scriptures. Majority of the respondents attended Holy Mass regularly.

Table 8

Key Informants' Regularity in Praying

Categories	Before	After
Doesn't Pray	1	0
Seldom	4	0
Often	7	12

Table 8 shows that before joining BFC, praying was not zealously observed by some respondents. After joining BFC, all respondents pray often.

Table 9

Intimacy of the Relationship with God of Key Informants

Before	Freq.	After	Freq.
No intimate relationship	2	No intimate rel.	0
Not so intimate	4	Intimate	1
Intimate	6	More intimate	11

Table 9 shows that before joining BFC, the key informants had less intimate relationship with God. After joining BFC, key informants level of intimacy with God increased.

Table 10

Key Informants' Involvement in the Barangay

<u>Category</u>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>
Youth Pres.	2	0
Student Govt. Org.	2	1
Student Body Org.	1	0
School clubs	2	1
Brgy. Health Worker	1	2
Brgy. Councilor	1	2
No involvement	3	0

Table 11

Informants' Participation in Church Activities

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>
Catechist	2	6
Choir	1	2
Novena. Church feasts, fiestas	10	12
Attending Mass regularly*	1	10
Go to Confession regularly*	2	10
Receive Holy Communion reg.*	5	11
Catholic Action Officer	1	1
Apostles of Christ	1	1
Legion of Mary	1	1
Virgin of Lourdes	1	1
Sacred Heart	1	1
COW	1	1
Bible study	1	0
El Shaddai	1	1
Lector	3	9
Total	32	67

*Total does not sum up to 100% due to involvement of key informants to different organizations or associations.

**Depends on how frequent the Holy Mass and Sacrament of Confession are held in the area.

Table 10 and 11 show that before joining, some key informants were not even members of any church or parish organization. After joining, inactive respondents

become involved in parish activities and organizations in the village or school. Respondents who were active in religious and civic organizations prior to their membership in BFC carried on and become more passionate in participating in those organizations. Respondents participate as catechist, lector, choir, and elder of BFC. There are some who added to their list of service in getting involved in civic matters such as village health worker, day care teacher, and village councilor.

Table 12

Changes in Attitude in the Key Informants

Categories	Freq.
More spiritual & spirituality is commitment to God	7
strong sense of what right & wrong & fear of God	5
more concern for the family	3
meaning, purpose & direction	2
self-worth/confidence	1
concern for others even to strangers	2
peace loving, patient, understanding	6
sinc -sincere relationship with others	1
less worry, peace, joy & courage to face trials	4
broad minded	3
appreciates everything God created	2
encounter more problems	3

Table 12 shows that respondents experienced great improvement in their spiritual life from being materialistic in their life's concerns and endeavors to spiritual. Within them, there is also inner transformation which are reflected in their good and compassionate behavior towards others. They also experienced peace, joy, and less worry.

Table 13

Most Helpful BFC Activities

Categories	Freq.
Weekly Celebration of the Word (Proclamation of the word and sharing)	9
All activities (celebration of the word, Celebration of the Eucharist)	2
Celebration of the Eucharist	1

Table 13 shows that the number one most helpful activity which truly enriches the respondents' spiritual life is the Weekly Celebration of the Word (proclamation of the Word and sharing) and second most helpful activity is "all activities" (Celebration of the Eucharist and Weekly Celebration of the Word). And the third is the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Table 14

Suggestions of Key Informants for BFC

Categories	Freq.
Have more people who will teach the word of God/bible	1
Parish should double its efforts on present programs/activities	1
Invite/encourage people to join programs/activities in the parish	1
Invite/encourage more parishioners to join BFC	5
Continue BFC	1
Parish must continue what it started and follow-up former members	3
Share the BFC experience	1
Witnessing/ Showing a good example as Christ's follower	1
No suggestion	1
Total	15

Table 14 shows that the top most suggestions of respondents are : encourage more people to join BFC, continue the program and follow-up members who have become inactive.

Conclusions

1. The BFC is an effective agent of socialization of new evangelization where dialogue between the local church and the lay faithful is taking place.
2. Through the BFC the Gospel is proclaimed and the gospel values and Church teachings are transmitted to the members.
3. The significance of BFC itself is that there is improvement in the spirituality of members who shares the Good News in the real sense of the word.
4. The spirituality of BFC is characterized by giving prominence on listening and obeying the Word of God.
5. The BFC's direct effect on the parish and neighborhood is not yet seen.
6. The BFC has no direct effect on the Catandunganon society.
7. Bringing people to personal commitment to Christ or to mature Christian faith will be truly effective with evangelization as church's primary task which must include the four elements for evangelization: koinonia (community), diakonia (service /mission), kerygma (preaching) and leutergia (worship).

Recommendation

1. The Diocese must encourage the BFC members to evangelize not only through witnessing but also through proclamation of the gospel. The meaning and significance of a kerygmatic Church should be fully understood among BFC members to facilitate parish evangelizers.
2. Inherent and spiritual gifts of the members must also be identified. Communion of God's people also means being able to put into use their talents and abilities for the benefit of the entire faithful.
3. The Diocese should welcome and support evangelization programs initiated by the parishioners.
4. Topics on family must be undertaken since ideal family relationship among BFC members still lag behind.
5. Topics for vital role of Sacraments in the advancement of members' relationship with God must be emphasized.
6. The Diocese and its parish priest must prioritize the nurturing of the BFC to sustain the vigor of the program for new evangelization.

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