

The Catholic Church And its Preferential Option For Politics

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Mr. Francisco Magno: Today, we shall discuss both a very relevant topic and sector: the church.

A few weeks ago, the Catholic Church held its Second Plenary Council and one of the resolutions it passed was that the church had to play a more active role in Philippine social and political development. Could this mean that we can expect a more activist role for the church?

To answer this question, we have with us Bishop Francisco Claver, former director of the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), the social arm of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). He also served as bishop of Malaybalay, Bukidnon. We also have a former Catholic priest, Mr. Edicio dela Torre from the Institute for Popular Democracy. And to provide us with the perspective of their church on church activism is Minister Adriel Miemban of the *Iglesia ni Cristo* who is also the president of the New Era College.

Bishop Claver: When I was preparing my response this morning, I wrote down here *trapos* [conjugation of the first syllable of the words traditional politicians to form a word which in Filipino means rags - Eds] and *trapas* but I do not know what *trapas* means. Perhaps it stands for traditional *padres* (priests). Now, when you add traditional politicians and traditional *padres*, the result would be no change. But then, on the other hand, the reaction might be so great that the result would be great change.

Much has been made about two points raised in the Plenary Council. First was the criticism on the political parties. One of the working papers of the council said that "there is no coherent ideology for transforming the status quo nor concern for the poor among the traditional politicians." From there it came to the second point, the proposal that the church should begin to train lay people for the task of social and political change.

I would just like to make two comments about these two statements. The first is that the observation that comes from the working papers of social concerns is really nothing new. Everybody is saying this about traditional parties and politicians. Secondly, the proposal to train leaders among the lay people for such task is nothing new either. Our schools are supposed to be doing this, bringing up Christian citizens and for leadership in the political life. I suppose the problem is that they have been failing. But like everybody else, we have all been failing.

Let me go to the questions that were raised for this symposium.

Firstly, "Will the Catholic Church have the resources and machinery to groom political leaders and to undertake the transformation it aims to help attain?" There are other instrumentalities of the church besides the schools that are directed towards transformation of people's values. And I would cite a whole catechetical program for instance, where catechists enter into schools, public schools included, to teach religion

and its values. There is also the social action arm of the church which is perhaps not too well known. Here, the church tries to approach political and economic problems, problems that have been left untouched by other church works.

Secondly, "Burdened with the legacy of conservatism, how will the Catholic Church meet the complexities of Philippine society?" First let me ask you: who are the conservative people here? I suppose the bishops, or could we say the Catholic people in general. I would answer both. For if conservatism is the problem of the church, I suppose it is the problem of the nation too, for Catholics make up more than eighty percent of the total population.

Yet, conservative as they are, I would say that they are not completely hopeless. For instance, I have been with the bishops since the seventies and I see the quantum leap from there. In 1972, after martial law was imposed, I remember the failure to convince the bishops to address the problem of military rule. But in 1986, after the snap election, it was much easier getting the bishops to face up to the problem of Marcos and the election that he tried to steal.

These incidents can tell you that something has happened even to the bishops and that they are more open now in involving themselves in so-called political questions. At the national level, the proliferation of non-governmental organizations(NGOs) and political organizations(POs) has been dramatic and significant. I think there is a new climate brewing. It is not too spectacular, yes, but that movement towards empowering people to act for themselves is growing.

And finally, in the church itself, parallel to the growth of NGOs and POs is the development of basic ecclesial communities. Again, the thrust here is towards getting people who ordinarily have not participated in the life of the church and the nation to participate much more meaningfully.

These are attempts to create a critical mass among people who have ordinarily been neglected by creating a more universalistic outlook among them.

And thirdly, "How will the politicization of the church reconcile with the constitutional provision of separation between church and state?" I take it that this principle of separation means really non-establishment of an official religion but we have extended this to mean also no political meddling by the church.

In the working papers of the Plenary Council, there is one paper that does pay much attention to this and it does make the distinction between what it calls the political field and the political arena. Very simply, the political field is where politics and morality meet. And it says we have much competence in that field. When it talks about the political arena, it talks about partisan politics. And traditionally, we will say that

the church, its bishops and priests, should not enter into it as a matter of course.

But the problem comes when the political arena and political field become one. In the political field, the church has the competence to speak on the morality of even political events. Now, when the stating of moral principles become itself political meddling, what do you do? Should the church stop enunciating moral principles because it has political repercussions? A very good example is when President Marcos tried to steal the election. Should the church not had intervened because that was a political question? Or was it because it saw that there were moral problems there connected with the elections?

The problem that I am trying to bring up here is the whole problem of when can the church meddle and when should it keep quiet. It is an accepted principle even in the church not to take part in partisan politics as much as possible for the simple reason that partisan politics is divisive and if it were divisive of the community then we do not go into it. But I say there is an exemption. When you cannot make a distinction between morality and partisan politics, that becomes the shady area.

Should the church form a political party and call it a Catholic political party, and is there anything in the law that would go against that? As far as I can see, there is none. Can the Catholic hierarchy come out and openly support candidates in elections? To me, this is not a question of moral and legal dos and donts. It is more a question of prudence and common sense. As I said, partisan politics is divisive to the nation and to the church.

Mr. Edicio de la Torre: Let me address the first point that was raised by Bishop Claver and that was the role of the schools in training leaders.

I think the activism of the Catholic Church and maybe even most Protestant churches has been this: that in a society you have leaders, and leaders, apart from their economic and political bases, are those who are trained. They go to higher education and become members of the intellectual elite. Churches and other private institutions that are into the school system not just for sheer profit would see themselves as helping influence Philippine politics and society by training and influencing the quality of leaders that will emerge from these schools.

When I was in the Federation of Free Farmers and we were trying to organize sugar workers and farmers in Negros, some well meaning Catholic lay persons were rather cautious saying, "Ed, watch out. You are organizing people who have been oppressed for so long. When they develop some power they might not know how to handle it. They will be very angry and will just take revenge." I answered, yes, of course it is a problem in the same way that the elite have problems handling power.

Empowerment of the people sounds nice but to handle power is always a difficulty, and that is why the churches have traditionally tried to train power holders in the responsible handling of power. And they did it not just in the kindergarten but up to the post-graduate, and from marriage encounters to retreats — the morality of taking profits and still going to heaven, exploitation not in the Marxist sense of simple removal of surplus but, you know, this kind of really brutal or heartless treatment.

There is a clear intention of training power holders in the moral responsibility of holding power and we know that it takes a very long time. But how come when you want to train grassroots leaders and empower them, we give them a three-day seminar and think that would take care of their training to responsibly handle power? We give four years college education, and graduate studies to boot, to members of the elite. Are peasants and workers supposed to be made by a superior moral stuff that you just need three days of training?

So I say, why don't you also invest money, time, and effort in training labor, peasant, and urban poor leaders so that they will become responsible holders of power? In fact, I used to quote, without his permission, Bishop Claver, wherein he distinguishes between the powers that be and the powers that will be. I think it is important for the churches to know how to serve both equally well.

It is clear that the churches have put their stakes on training the power holders. I think the balancing of personnel and resources in training the powers that be and the powers that will be is going to be a crucial indicator of the churches' commitment to new politics.

When we talk of church activism in politics, I would like to distinguish three areas of political involvement where the churches have been active traditionally and will be in the future.

In a rough sketch, in a power structure, you would have the power holders, the powerless whom you want to get power, and you would have people somewhere in the middle who do not have real power but who are not really powerless. Now, when you say church political involvement, it is so easy to collapse all three blocks together. But actually, a successful strategy either to maintain or to transform a society must equally and effectively handle these three groupings.

For example, a movement for change must help advance the agenda of the empowerment of the majority who are poor and powerless. And most of us would say, yes, that is good for the church, but this is only one-third of the task. Even if we did this very well, we would not succeed in changing the power structure of society. You need two more tasks.

The second task is to be able to win over those who see themselves as somewhere in the middle to the prospects of change with its risks

and its possibilities. By winning them over, I do not mean that they all join enthusiastically. It is more like what a scientist called a favorable neutrality, saying, "well, we are not going to join you, but if you do come, we will welcome you." This is important because if you have the illusion that you will win over the middle only by converting them then you will wait forever. Every society has them. And I do not mean middle class because people caught in the middle also include those who are poor.

Now, even if you have this perfect combination, getting the left and the middle together, which is the shared imagination of all progressive groups we will still not win if the power holders are full of moral righteousness believing we represent something worse. Progressive politics must neutralize the moral certainty of the powerful who oppose change. Now, this is the exact reverse of the strategy of maintaining social order. Because in maintaining social order, the power holders must not only seek to unite themselves but need also to continually win over those in the middle, if not purely positively, at least by scaring them that what is going to happen is worse. Moreover, they need to weaken the moral passion and certainty of people whose lives push them to seek change.

Now in these three spheres, the churches in the Philippines, from bishops to lay people, have played crucial roles. Just take the classic case when Cardinal Sin chose Cory Aquino over Doy Laurel. The bishops and protestant leaders of South Korea were not able to do that with the two Kims. A lot of church teaching and preaching have produced a generation of people who see it as their moral imperative to serve those in power because the latter are assumed to have programs for the people.

The main thrust of church activism which evokes positive response both here and abroad is the commitment of church people and resources to the direct empowerment of the poorer majority through various forms of organizations, secular or religious. I think these categories might be useful to locate a framework for assessing where the activism of the church really lies.

I think the church should be active in all three levels. I feel that one of the key areas where positive increase will register even more than in the past would be the one in the middle, to be able to develop an ethic and sensibility for people in the middle to make their own choices. That is why the theology of a preferential option for the poor is directed mainly at those in the middle. Not that poor people do not have to make their decisions. But often, they do not have the chance to make their choices. The choices are made for them.

The motivations that operate in politics are mixed. This is contradictory to our traditional orientation as church and lay leaders which is to aim at the purity of motives. Morality means selflessness. Self-fulfillment

belongs to the gospel of wealth and power. Sadly, politics is much more complex.

This is part of my dilemma in the formation of lay leaders. How do you mix self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment so that you do not get burnt-out? What is my point about these motives? My own reading, for example, of the collective moral stand of the bishops in 1986 was that there was this powerful mixture of at least three motives. One was clearly an anger against the dictatorship. There was also a love for democracy, preferably a familiar one. There was also partly an anxiety or fear that if the bishops did not act decisively at that point and the people do not succeed to peacefully overthrow the dictatorship, there might be a resurgence and possible victory of a force that promises change but is not familiar. It is too left and does not recognize a god, except the one that is nameless in the people's hearts.

Now, it is not a question of saying anger is good, fear is bad, and love is the best. I think if we sort out our motives even when we go on demonstrations or write manifestos or commit ourselves, we will realize that we are driven by a pluralism of motives and they are all gifts of the spirit.

My own personal advocacy for training purposes is that the key to transformation is how to organize our motives, so that the lead motive is the most noble and the other motives are secondary. But like a good jet fuel, you are driven much more powerfully if it were a mixture. And depending on the task, there will be different lead motives. On certain issues, anger must take the lead. But if it is always taking the lead, you get exhausted after a while and you do not know anymore at whom you should be angry and whom you should not be because it has become a habit. And when you run out of targets, you turn at each other.

There is a time when the lead motive is simply celebration even in the midst of struggle and that is very *Pinoy* (Filipino, colloquial). You want to laugh and so someone asks, "Why do you laugh?" "Because I am *Pinoy*, I want to laugh." It does not mean the anger is lost. It is somewhere there and it is part of the fuel.

There is hope for many middle class people. Sometimes, there is guilt. There is nothing wrong with guilt so long as it is not your only motive because if it is your only motive, you become very vulnerable and will lead to exhaustion very soon.

A lot of people immediately attribute devilish and Machiavellian attitude to church involvement in politics. And Church people would say, "No, it is only the holy spirit and it is all noble." In reality, the motives are mixed and they are all valid. It is the proper mixture that is important.

Last point, I attended a seminar in Kuala Lumpur where someone from Sri Lanka was saying that in the Buddhist section of Sri

Lanka, when you want to deliver a message and you want it to reverberate and have an impact in society beyond its actual content then you should try to course it through the Buddhist monks. According to him, the Buddhist monk in his society is the nodal point of semiotic density.

You see my hypothesis is that the power of the church or power of certain church people, church symbols, church language is not simply a power of money, people, and skills but in certain cultures at certain circumstances, it is the power of being a nodal point of semiotic density.

The question that comes into my mind is whether Cardinal Sin is a nodal point of semiotic density? At a certain point in EDSA, the voice of the cardinal was much more powerful than the collective voice of many progressive priests because at that moment, he personified the church together with the meanings the people had attached to this institution.

I do hope that the power of the church will be seen in this light. This has been my personal dilemma. I sometimes wonder when some people believe in what I say whether it is because of the content or whether it is still a lingering after effect of being a part of this collective nodal point of semiotic density.

When I was still in the mission for national liberation in the underground, Bishop Claver was saying, "you better tell those guys to watch out, they might be reproducing clericalism in a left form." At times, when clerics speak, no matter what the message, the people will follow, before conservatively, now towards revolution, without having thought through it themselves simply because the one who speaks is symbolic of moral authority. This is the gray area.

Will the church lose this particular moral weight by risking it in this game of partisan politics where hardly anyone remains untarnished, or will it be able to overcome the challenge as it delivers its message of change?

Dr. Adriel Miemban: I am giving a reaction on the activism of the Catholic Church from the point of view of an outsider and as a member of another church. As a non-Catholic, we share the vision of the majority church in trying to build an ideal society, filled with justice and democracy, where each Filipino will be educated and given his constitutional rights. We also share the concern of the academe in trying to discern how the traditional majority church for the past 470 years could still be instrumental in national reconstruction and national rehabilitation.

What has happened to the Philippines especially since 1986? This is the big question that all of us are asking. "Give unto Ceasar what belongs to Ceasar, and unto God what belongs to God," this is written in the New Testament in Matthew 20:21. Our Constitution, from the

Malolos Republic to the present, has upheld the principle of the separation of church and state. We have tried our best to adhere to this concept. But it could not be avoided that the two overlap. On the point of teaching and moulding the future leaders of the state, ninety percent is handled by Catholic and private institutions. But why is our society like this? Why do we still have the Garchitorena scam? Why do graft and corruption continue in the Bureau of Customs? Why do our public officials live immoral lives?

Now, can the Catholic Church confront the complexities of Philippine society? She is trying her best and we appreciate the efforts of the Roman Catholic hierarchy towards this end. Yet it sometimes forgets that there are other Filipinos — Muslims, Protestants, and Church of Christ members — who should be involved in the search for national unity and solidarity. We can certainly pitch in our resources and share our perspectives on the improvement of the politics of the nation and the upliftment of our economic condition.

We are not a purely Catholic nation though at times our Catholic leaders act as if we were. Eighty percent of us are Catholics, but what happens to the remaining twenty percent? Are they no longer Filipinos?

In the recent EDSA celebration, for example, what should have been an occasion for unity became an occasion that highlighted our disunity due to the over-meddling of some clerics. I would like to quote an editorial that delved on this:

People power was a political event. Its commemoration should be a state event. This does not mean that the celebration cannot be given a religious dimension. But the religious part should be ecumenical. It is a Filipino celebration that all can participate in as Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, or pagan. The job of those in charge of the celebration is precisely to see to it that all can participate.

We also wanted to join the celebration but it is against our belief to revere statues. The fundamentalists held their own celebration arguing that the glory for the miracle at EDSA was due to God and not to the Virgin Mary. Perhaps for us, the miracle we need to do is for us to unite and help one another improve the nation's plight.

Fr. Francisco : What are the things we have to consider when we analyze a church?

Firstly, we have to consider the scope of that church. Here in the Philippines for example, though eighty-two point one percent are Catholics — roughly forty-six million Filipinos — only two percent of them belong to any Catholic Church organization. Further, only ten percent go to Sunday mass.

A Social Weather Stations survey shows the Catholic Church enjoying a fifty percent positive margin of credibility. But the same survey

reveals that when it comes to church involvement in politics, the margin of credibility goes down.

I am mentioning these things because when we say the Catholic Church and its role in politics, we need to be concrete what or who are we referring to. Are we referring to the bishops and priests? Are we referring to the two percent who have direct links with the Catholic Church? Or are we referring to the more or less ten percent who attend mass every Sunday?

Secondly, we have to consider the structure of the church, and here my example again is the Catholic Church. Oftentimes, we see the church as if it has a military command whereby anything the commander-in-chief orders is followed by everyone in the outfit.

In my opinion, we need to see the nuances of the structures within a church. We need to understand the organizational structure of any church to see its decision-making process. How does it arrive at decisions and how are these decisions implemented?

For instance, though there is a CBCP made up of all the bishops, it has no legal jurisdiction on the dioceses of the bishops. In 1986, when the CBCP came out with a pastoral letter on the snap election, I could remember one bishop who wrote his own pastoral letter and had it read instead in his own diocese.

Thirdly, we have to consider how a church understands itself. In the middle ages, the Catholic Church understood itself as the perfect society. Everyone outside was an unbeliever and worthless, unless he or she was brought inside. If this is a particular church's self-understanding then when it comes to the role it would play in the field of politics, it would aim to place all of society in its own community. The way the Catholic Church understands itself now, there is more stress given to the church being a communion within a society of brothers. Thus, there is no longer the obsession to herd everyone to the fold of the church.

Taking off from what Edicio de la Torre mentioned earlier on the nodal point of semiotic density, I see that Christian symbols and rituals have been central to the people's understanding of the meanings imbedded in their personal lives and their nation's history. Take the passion's sacrifice, death, and redemption. I agree with the analysis that many people interpret these images in the light of their own search for freedom from hunger, redemption from exploitation and oppression, etc.

In fact, these symbols and rituals are no longer the monopoly of the Catholic Church, or any other church, for the people have internalized these in their own peculiar, autonomous contexts and experiences.

I agree with Minister Miemban that the EDSA celebration caused division rather than cohesion. The use of a religious symbol closely

identified with a particular church, in this case the Catholic Church's Virgin Mary, caused the controversy. I was a member of the steering committee of that celebration and I was very vocal with my view that we should separate the national celebration with the Catholic one. For if I were a Filipino Muslim or Protestant, how can I identify with the celebration when the symbols used are definitely linked only with the Catholic Church?

Prof. Rebolida : We need to give more indicators when we say the Catholic Church is conservative. What are the characteristics of its conservatism and are they still being manifested?

In my opinion, when we say that the Catholic Church is conservative in politics, it is when the church refuses to get involved politically. In the economy, it is when the church confines itself on dole-outs to the poor.

Now, how far has the Catholic Church gone from these indicators? With the declaration of the preferential option for the poor, it would seem that the church has shifted its allegiance from rich to poor. We now could see resources not only of the Catholic Church but also the Protestant churches through the National Council of Churches in the Philippines being utilized to implement projects and programs aimed at people empowerment in the political and social realm.

We are seeing today many church-based or church-related organizations. They may not be officially or formally endorsed by their respective churches but because they are composed of people who are active within their churches, they tend to exert the kind of church influence when they do their work. I see these organizations becoming more important because from them would come new ideas that would challenge the old mindset existing within the institutional churches.

I see the increasing role of the Catholic Church in the affairs of politics especially with the recent Plenary Council. Here we can find the laity trying to form itself as an active block for change in our society. This is good but there must be a re-evaluation of what these people will teach and preach. So, the Catholic Church has to assess its view on what really would facilitate the improvement of the Filipino nation.

Mr. Marino : First, I would like to clarify what the Catholic Church is. In Vatican I, the church is the hierarchy. But Vatican II changed that for it saw the need to adopt measures that would make it again relevant to society. Thus, after Vatican II, the concept of the church being the people of God became dominant. In this context, the church has the responsibility and must have the commitment to protect the rights of its people.

But the questions are: to what extent must the church be involved and what channels must it use in doing so? Bishop Claver mentioned earlier that the church already has programs to advance viewpoints of

change. There are the catechetical programs, action programs, and the basic ecclesial communities.

The church has always been involved in politics. But is it willing, as Ed de la Torre asked earlier, to risk losing its moral authority by immersing itself deeper into the realm of politics?

Open Forum

Question: Can the churches really democratize or is hierarchy built-in with them?

Bishop Claver: Is it possible for the Catholic Church to be democratized in a hierarchical situation as it is in now? It is possible and that is precisely what is happening at the grassroots where we are developing the participatory church.

The Catholic Church is hierarchical, there is no question about that. But when you begin to have people starting to assume the responsibility, you begin to see that there are certain things that you do not have to go to the pope to decide on. We realize that the people at the bottom can decide for themselves and these decisions are not against church teachings.

Question: Are we in the same situation now as we were in the martial law period that church intervention in politics again is necessitated?

Bishop Claver: I am afraid we have always been in that situation. All social institutions at this time should do something about the bad situation we are in and I feel it is the obligation of the church to do its share.

Mr. de la Torre: The martial law question was simpler, the crisis we have now is much more complex. Everybody has a reading of the situation and everybody has his or her own alternative. This situation would demand from the churches a more sophisticated approach.

Question: Could anyone please comment on the observation that the problem with the Filipinos is that they are too prone to philosophize but are too inhibited to act.

Mr. de la Torre: I think it is wrong to say that we philosophize too much and act too little. Ironically, it is not action but the philosophizing that we lack.

By philosophizing, we mean a deeper understanding of our problems and a more profound grasp of their solutions. Activism that is unreflective, maybe we have too much of it here. Thus you have activists who