

Some Notes on the Philippine Revolution, the Involvement of the Church, and Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 1985, the then President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, announced the holding of "snap" elections for the positions of President and Vice-President of the Republic. On February 25, 1986, Marcos was ousted as President by a popular non-violent revolution which catapulted Corazon Aquino and Salvador Laurel into the Presidency and Vice-Presidency of the Philippines respectively.

The downfall of Marcos was the end-result of a mounting and widening social opposition, which included the political opposition, a section of the business community, the "reformist" group of the military establishment and the bulk of the Catholic Church. Certainly the military rebellion, initiated on February 22 and led by then -and now- Minister of National Defense, Juan Ponce Enrile and then Deputy Chief -and now Chief- of Staff Fidel Ramos hastened the end of the Marcos fourteen years dictatorship. It could not have succeeded so rapidly and so peacefully without the sustained active participation of the people opposing Marcos and supporting Corazon Aquino, in particular the moderate forces of society and the Church. "People's power,"

in fact, won the revolution in four historical days of February, 1986.

The majority of the "people's power" were members of the People of God, of the Church, including the animating power of bishops, priests and religious men and women. From the perspective of Christian faith, the transformation of the social order belongs properly though not exclusively to the laity (cf. Vatican II, GS, 43). The specific role of lay men and women is to engage in temporal, secular affairs and order them according to God's plan. The proper role of Bishops and priests is the sacred ministry of communion and reconciliation, while the religious are to be principally committed to witness the spirit of the beatitudes and imitate more closely the Jesus of history and faith (cf. Vatican II, LG, 31).

Hundreds of thousands of lay men and women were personally involved in political activities before and during the Philippine revolution. Likewise, thousands of priests and religious, including seminarians and the majority of the bishops were also directly involved in social activities geared towards political change. Some priests and religious boycotted the elections; but, afterwards, they also joined the great majority of their brothers and sisters in the effort to regain democracy. A few priests and religious, however, did not participate in the elections, nor in the peaceful revolution: the members of the New People's Army, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines, who have opted for the armed struggle to fight poverty, injustice and imperialism.

While there is no problem regarding the political involvement of the laity, there can be concerning the bishops, priests and religious, who are asked by their specific charisms to keep distance from politics and to respect and uphold the separation of Church and State. In the following comments, and from the perspective of social ethics (particularly of the social teachings of the Church), we shall try to answer these questions: How was the Philippine Church -meaning here bishops, priests and religious- involved before and during the revolution? Was her involvement directly moral and indirectly political? Was it also a directly political involvement?

2. THE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF THE CHURCH

The downfall of Marcos was dynamically begun on August 21, 1983, the day ex-Senator Benigno Aquino, husband of president Corazon Aquino, was murdered at the tarmac of the Manila International Airport. Even before this there had been increasing but ineffective opposition to Marcos since he declared Martial Law in September 1972. The Church herself had repeatedly denounced Marcos' continuation of Martial Law, which was officially, but not really, lifted in January 1981, just one month before the visit to the Philippines of Pope John Paul II. After Ninoy Aquino was slain, however, the opposition of bishops, priests and religious to the unjust and oppressive Marcos regime widened. Since then, particularly priests and religious, animated by strong statements from the Hierarchy, began holding People's masses, prayer vigils, and joining in great numbers the parliament of the streets to protest injustices, violation of human rights, and government violence. When Marcos proclaimed the holding of snap elections, the involvement of the Church increased enormously.

The bishops, individually and collectively came out with strong letters and statements which conscientized the catholic population (85 per cent) on its serious social responsibilities and on its grave obligation to vote for the right candidates and, thereafter, to defend their votes and, if cheated to fight non-violently for truth and justice. The single most important and powerful statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), led by Cardinal Ricardo Vidal, was published seven days after the elections, on February 14, 1986, and read in most parishes and Churches on the Sunday of February 16. In this *Post-Election Statement* approved almost unanimously after two days of deep reflection, dialogue and prayer, the Philippine bishops (over 60 of them participated in the extraordinary meeting) denounced unparalleled fraud in the conduct of the elections; condemned implicitly the fraudulent victory of Marcos by declaring his authority as having no moral basis; asked the government to correct the evil it has inflicted on the people, and, if the mandate of the people is not respected, the Christians who agree with the bishops' assessment and evaluation of the February 7 polls are invited to resist by peaceful means the evil of power without authority:

The way indicated to us now, the bishops stated, is the way of non-violent struggle for justice.

On the day the CBCP's Statement was read from pulpits throughout the land, Corazon Aquino, who was convinced with millions of Filipinos, including the majority of bishops, priests and religious, that she had been robbed of the political victory, held a people's rally after a thanksgiving concelebrated mass at Manila's Luneta Park. Here, surrounded by nearly two million followers and sympathizers, she called the Filipino people to fight non-violently, through non-cooperation with and boycotts of mass media, banks and other establishments closely connected with Marcos. Considering the popular appeal and following, of the boycott, we feel that it could have succeeded—probably after some time — in toppling the Marcos government.

Cardinal Jaime Sin, as archbishop of Manila, the seat of government and the center of the revolution, played a key role within the widespread involvement of the Church. He issued two very strong and forceful pre-election statements on clean and honest elections. Earlier, the Cardinal was greatly instrumental in uniting the divided political opposition. And through the four days and seventy five hours revolution, particularly during the first critical night of February 22, he encouraged, and even pleaded with the people to march to the military camps of Crame and Aguinaldo, where the rebels were concentrated, to defend them by surrounding the camps and occupying the streets near them.

Cardinal Sin made wide use of Radio Veritas, the radio station of the Catholic Church, the most credible — and for some hours of the revolution the only means of communication. A few hours after the military mutiny had been declared, the Cardinal went on the air a few times to ask the people to go to defend the rebels and to provide them with food; in the morning of February 23, the Cardinal of Manila went again on the air to appeal to Marcos and General Fabian Ver, his Chief of Staff, not to use violence against the people and the rebels. (At the beginning of the Revolution, Cardinal Sin made also important telephone calls to key persons and institutions, including the three convents of nuns located in Manila; he asked the nuns "to pray and fast until death if necessary" for a peaceful and successful revolution).

Earlier, other bishops as well as priests and religious had been invited by the Radio Veritas staff to comment and reflect on electoral activities, particularly on numerous irregularities in the preparation, conduct and aftermath of the polls. Through the whole process of elections, and for the first two days of the revolution (the Radio Veritas transmission tower was knocked down by a group of armed men -reportedly, government troopers- in the morning of February 23, 1986), the Catholic radio station was one of the principal instruments in the denunciation of electoral frauds, in the conscientization of the people, in the holding of peace during the most difficult first twelve hours of the revolution. The outstanding civic and religious performance of Radio Veritas is substantially due to a highly professional and socially committed staff, many of whom are priests and religious, with a few bishops. (The star through the elections and the revolution was the dynamic lay woman June Keithley).

A few thousand priests and religious (and seminarians) who made themselves visible in their cassocks and habits, were deeply involved in the whole revolutionary process as leaders of prayers, masses, mass-actions, as volunteers of NAMFREL (National Citizens Movement for Free Election), as part of the human barricades surrounding the military camps and adjacent streets, as front lines, with lay men and women always, facing the advancing tanks, armored vehicles, and meeting -and persuading- the soldiers of Marcos not to fight and kill brother Filipinos! We have to admire the courage of religious and lay women talking to the soldiers, peacefully, patiently, and convincing them with words of peace and solidarity, rosaries and flowers! Truly, the February Revolution has been a revolution Philippine style; it is a genuine revolution, for its main elements are present, that is, the toppling of existing political power and the establishment of a new power, and the adherence of the masses — of People's Power.

3. THE CHURCH'S INDIRECT POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

The Church's proper mission is not of the economic, political or social order, but of the religious one (Vatican II, GS, 42). Hence, the proper role of bishops, priests and religious is likewise the religious-spiritual dimension of human life.

We hasten to add, however, that this dimension of evangelization is indissolubly linked to human promotion or temporal liberation: without this, the mission of the Church would be incomplete and, therefore, incorrect.

Human promotion entails the denunciation of injustices — poverty, violence, oppression, torture, falsehood — and the proclamation by words and deeds of human dignity, rights, particularly of the defenseless — the poor, marginalized and oppressed. Thus, we can say that the involvement of the Philippine Church was correct: bishops, priests and religious denounced injustices and defended human rights by words and deeds — through active non-violence. But still we have to ask ourselves, *was the Church's involvement in the revolutionary process also political?*

Man's social life comprises the economic, political and cultural (including religious) dimensions. Properly speaking, as we have mentioned earlier, the socio-economic and socio-political activities do not belong directly to the Church's mission, but to the State — to the government and the citizens, and, among the People of God, to the laity. Socio-cultural activities, including education, are the field of endeavour not only of the State, but also of the Churches and other social group; in human perspective, socio-religious activities are part of socio-cultural action.

The socio-religious dimension of human life constitute the mission of the Church, including human promotion and liberation. This liberation, entails the defense of the moral dimension of economic, political and cultural activities. John Paul II has stated that the bishops, with priests and religious, are the spokesmen of the moral order. Thus, the religious aspect of the proper mission of the Church implies also the moral dimension of human life and activities; Vatican II teaches, in line with Christian tradition, that political authority must be exercised within the limits of morality and when it is not, the oppressed people may lawfully defend their rights against abusive authority (GS, 74). *When the bishops, priests and religious defend the people's rights actively are they involved in political activities?*

We have to distinguish between social activities which are directly political, and social activities which are indirectly political. *Directly political activities* are the ones connected with the

art of politics, that is, activities directed to the conquering and exercising of power in the civil society, while the *indirectly political* are socio-cultural activities, outside party politics, linked with the responsible social life of politicians and citizens.

Ordinarily, bishops, priests and religious should not be involved in directly political activities, but they can—and should—be involved in indirectly political activities; Vatican II states that bishops, with the priests, are to preach Christ's message in such a manner that "all the activities of the faithful will be bathed in the light of the Gospel" (GS, 43).

Hence, when the Philippine bishops called for honest and free elections before February 7, 1986, they were performing an indirectly political activity, which was part of their proper obligation to promote human rights. And when priests and religious—and a few bishops—formed human chains not to allow the government tanks to advance towards the military camps of the rebels, they were really protecting peace in solidarity, which is a human and Christian value and, therefore, a non-directly political activity.

In the context of gross social injustices, and increasing social awareness, the Church is committed today, more than ever before, to the defense, witnessing and promotion of human dignity and rights, of justice, freedom, love and peace. This active involvement in social life is an integral part of the mission of bishops, priests and religious. In the Synod of Bishops '71, the *bishops* of the Church committed themselves to *assume new responsibilities and new duties*, including the denunciation of injustices and the proclamation of justice; furthermore, they committed themselves to be the *voice of the voiceless* of our societies. As John Paul II said at Puebla (1979), "If the Church makes herself present in the defense of, or in the advancement of, man, she does so in line with her mission, which, although it is religious and not political, cannot fail to consider man in the entirety of his being."

The *priests* were requested by the Synod '71, to act *evangelically, that is, without violence, in their defense of fundamental human rights, the full development of persons, and the pursuit*

of the cause of justice and peace. The religious, with the bishops and priests, are required by their non-hierarchical charism to be in solidarity with the poor and, therefore, to be committed to fight injustice with Gospel weapons.

The religious are, then, asked to struggle against injustice, but without losing their identity as religious, meaning, without direct political involvement, without ideological identification with a particular political system. Similarly, the priests (and more so the bishops) have to keep a certain distance from direct political involvement, in particular, from active militancy in any political party. Moreover, priests as well as religious are forbidden by Canon Law to assume public office entailing participation in the exercise of civil power (CIC, Can. 285). Hence, bishops, priests and religious are directly involved in serving the human person and in defending his rights, not based on any political or ideological system, but from the cause of Jesus Christ (cf. Vatican II, PO, 6).

4. DIRECT POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT?

The Church's involvement in the Philippine unjust and oppressive situation has been, in general, directly religious-spiritual, moral, and indirectly political. *Was it also, at least in some cases, directly political?*

Close associates and partisans of the ex-President, and Marcos himself, some evangelical Christians and a few Catholics situated politically and theologically at the right (or far right), answered that question in the affirmative, that is, the Catholic Church, through her bishops, priests and religious, was directly involved in socio-political activities that led to the downfall of Marcos.

It is easily understandable that Marcos and his political party were against the Church, for the Church was usually indirectly but really against them. However, it is hard to understand the accusation of the Church coming from some Christians and Catholics.

Prudence asks the Christian to be cautious; but, for him to be over-cautious is certainly imprudent and incorrect. To have

kept silent would have been against the Church's mission, which implies to call injustice by name and to denounce those responsible for injustices. To have tried to remain neutral would have amounted, in reality, to supporting the status quo, that is, an acknowledged unjust situation and political manipulation by the State. To have stayed at the margin of the revolution would have been probably disastrous to peace and solidarity.

Facing long standing injustice and oppression, the Church had to pronounce a courageous word of denunciation, and she pronounced it prophetically. Seeing clearly the unsurmountable evidence of fraud in the holding of election, the Church had to take sides, and she took the right side. Instead of choosing between prayer and social action, during the revolution, she chose correctly social action based and echoed in prayer. Furthermore, there is no alternative between good and evil: she can only choose what is good or, in some cases, the lesser evil.

For most Catholics, the Church's response to the critical events of February 1986 were substantially positive, from the stand of Christian orthodoxy (correct doctrine). Their non-violent social involvement was truly orthopraxis (right action). It was directly moral and indirectly political involvement. In some individual cases of priests and religious and even some bishops, this involvement of the Church "appeared," and perhaps was, directly political. For instance -this was some people's allegation- when priests and religious and bishops led socio-religious services only with and for the political opposition; or when a few priests and religious seemed to have campaigned actively for the Cory-Doy ticket.

Accepting that perhaps it was true that some priests and religious were involved in directly political activities, still the general involvement of the hierarchy, the clergy and the religious men and women was only indirectly political. We could take the argument further: granting, for the sake of argument, that the Church was partly involved in direct political activities, was this involvement outside the demands of Christian faith?

We would answer in the negative. Reason? In the Philippines we were dealing with an extraordinary situation, and in this

case, direct political involvement is a Christian option of the Church.

Vatican II stated that in special situations of need, the Church *can* and indeed should initiate activities on behalf of all men (GS, 42). In these situations, in particular, priests and religious, with the consent of their respective bishop or superior, can even assume leadership (in parties and/or labor unions) in politics; special situations include those when the defense of human rights and the promotion of the common good so require (cf. CIC, Can. 287 § 2).

Therefore, even if, perhaps, some priests and religious (and a few bishops) "appeared" to be directly politically involved in Philippine elections and in the revolution, their actions in most cases were correct from the Christian perspective of social ethics. Truly, their proper role is not to lead but to support and encourage the political activities of the laity; in special situations, however, their role means also leading by example: to ask others to fight injustice in the streets or at the polling places is an easy task to perform, but often not credible unless it is carried out.

Another important point: bishops, priests and religious are Filipino Citizens and, therefore, deeply concerned with the future of their country. After all, as we read in the document "Ministerial Priesthood" by the Synod of Bishops '71, in cases where there *legitimately exist different political, social and economic options, priests (and religious and bishops), like all citizens, have a right to select their personal options.*

Substantially the Church's contribution to fight injustice and falsehood was greatly instrumental in journeying from oppression to moderate freedom. This is highly positive and even commendable: bishops, priests, and religious were with their people in the time of crisis -animating them, inspiring them, leading them. It has been a sight to behold. From the perspective of humanity. And from the perspective of Christian faith.

5. BACK TO RELIGIOUS-SPIRITUAL INVOLVEMENT

The Synod of Bishops '85 spoke relevantly of the Church, the People of God, as mystery and communion. The communion

of the People of God means unity (one God, one Mediator, Jesus Christ, one Spirit, one baptism and one eucharist) and *pluriformity* (the one same Spirit works numerous and different gifts and charisms — I Cor 12:4, ff). Although the Church of Christ is one, we speak correctly of the *universal church* and of the *local churches*; these make present the universal Church throughout the world.

The pluriformity of the Church implies different social commitments of the Christian -ministers, religious and lay-, springing from distinct social situations, which, interpreted from the one Christian faith, issue varied social action programs. Pope Paul VI wrote that *it is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and direction for action from the social teaching of Church* (OA. 4).

The local Churches, then, are obliged to select among the options possible the ones called for by their particular, unique social situation and the corresponding commitments.

The options and commitments of the Philippine local Church have been decisively contributory to the attainment of more justice, truth, freedom, and solidarity, which are the pillars of the social order envisioned and promoted by Christian faith. Moreover, the non-violent, prayerful and united response of bishops, priests, religious and lay persons appear as an excellent example to follow and model to imitate for other local Churches that might be in similar social situations and contexts. (More harmony among and less confrontation between bishops, priests and religious is needed in the Church of Christ and in many local Churches.)

Thus, the Philippine Church has proven practically that positive social change through non-violence, that a non-violent revolution is possible — and effective. The response of the Philippine Church has been, definitely, a Christian response to a social crisis. In this context, we feel that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was influenced by the success of the Philippine non-violent revolution when, in its *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* of March 22, 1985, states that “passive

resistance" shows a way more conformable to moral principles and having no less prospects for success, than armed struggle, which can also be morally used against prolonged tyranny, but only as a last resort (*Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, n. 79).

We hasten to add that the peaceful war against injustice is never totally won in this world — the justice of the kingdom of God is also eschatological. And, therefore, a just struggle for justice must go on permanently: from injustice to justice; from justice to more justice, and, above all, for reconciliation and love. New injustices have to be fought every day. Men and women have to eradicate evil from their hearts, so that it will not be echoed in the economic, political and cultural structures of society. The February Revolution was substantially won by the people in four historic days; however, this triumph of freedom, justice and solidarity needs to be maintained and strengthened by the political leaders and the people, aided by the critical supportive collaboration of the Church (cf. GS, 76). The genuine expectations fanned by the revolution have to be slowly but firmly realized, if we do not want the destructive seeds of social discontent, political polarization and armed violence to grow.

As Christians, we know that no political party or ideological system can encapsule the immanent-transcendent cause of Jesus Christ. We are all aware, furthermore, of Lord Acton's statement, that is, that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Certainly, power, in the hands of any and every person tends to corrupt, and needs to be controlled by goodness. As Confucius said, "He whose wisdom brings him into power needs goodness to secure that power; else, though he gets it, he will certainly lose it."

In Christian perspective, dictatorial powers should only be permitted in a real emergency: when the common good demands it, and only for a short time. Vatican II said: "In any case, it harms humanity when the government takes on totalitarian or dictatorial forms injurious to the rights of persons or social groups" (GS, 75).

The Church, then, has to continue doing her prophetic role, which is part of her ordinary mission of proclaiming salvation in

Christ Jesus. However, after the extraordinary social situation that called for an extraordinary religious-moral-political commitment and action, the Philippine Church is asked by her faith and by humanity to go back to her ordinary task of evangelization in its double and interrelated aspect, which is primarily religious-spiritual and integrally human-temporal to include faith and justice, prayer and social commitment (Acts, 6:2-4); to that sacred ministry, which entails necessarily — let us never forget it! — the denunciation of injustice and the affirmation of human dignity and rights (cf. Pontifical Commission "Justice and Peace," *The Church and Human Rights*, no. 61). Still, bishops, priests and religious must be, and become, more and more, peacemakers, and agents of genuine reconciliation and fraternity.

It was highly exemplary of the bishops, priests and religious to be with the people in their struggle for justice. The Church must continue to be with the people and fight any form of "elitism." Above all, she is asked to continue being "the voice of the voiceless" in our society, that is, of the poor. The Church and all her institutions, associations and movements should strengthen practically its preferential option for the poor, the majority of our people. Thus, bishops, priests and religious are asked to distance themselves from political power and fight the possible temptation of a "clericalization" of politics; their respective charism, moreover, demands from them to be committed to educate the Christians in faith and justice, and to evangelize all persons while respecting the various political options that are directed to the common good of all.

The directly political dimension of social life is the proper field of action of Christian lay men and women, who must be supported and encouraged to deepen and widen their commitment — their particular charism and vocation — to the transformation of the secular order, including the political order so that this will be directed to the common good; in political issues, however, the Church admits legitimate pluralism (cf. Vatican II, GS, 43; cf. Id., 75).

In their commitment to social change, the lay men and women are asked to be guided by their Christian conscience, energized by God's grace, and animated by the social teachings of the

Church, rooted on the Gospel. They should not wait passively for orders from the ministers and religious. As sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ (cf. Vatican II, LG, 31), they should be actively involved in the denunciation of injustices and affirmation of justice in temporal affairs; they should take the initiative here and not wait passively for orders and directives from the hierarchy, the clergy and the religious, as Paul VI strongly advised (PP, no. 81; cf. GS, 43; *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, n. 80).

The bishops, priests and religious are hopefully back to their ordinary roles. The bishops, as successors of the apostles are the shepherds of their flocks, teachers of faith and high priests of Christ (Vatican II, LG, 21), "principle and foundation of unity" (LG, 23). The priests, as ministers of Christ, as principal co-workers of the bishops, are "witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one" (Vatican II, PO, 3), "sign and factor of unity and fraternity" (John Paul II, *Address to Priests*: Mexico, January 27, 1979). Finally, the religious men and women, as agents of peace and fraternal solidarity, as signs of heaven, are consecrated to the Lord to seek "the full conversion of people and society to the ways of the Gospel through witness and service" (Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Promotion*, 1978). To priests and religious, John Paul II said during his Philippine visit: *You are not social or political figures or officials of a temporal order, but radically servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

Bishops, priests and religious men and women are, above all *ministers and servants* not of a -any- political party, or ideological system, but of *every person and all peoples*. Shunning direct political activities, they are to do always their utmost to foster among people peace and harmony, based on justice (CIC, Can. 287): to proclaim to the world the Good News of Jesus centered on the reconciliation between God and man; between man and man — and with nature.

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