THE CHURCH IN THE PHILIPPINES: TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AFTER VATICAN II

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Twenty-seven years after Vatican II is a good time to look back and take stock of what has been the "post-Vatican II history: in the Church in the Philippines."

These 27 years were years of rapid change: change unmatched in our entire history. Years indelibly marked by a dictatorship which perhaps began with good intentions, but in time brought only ruin and misery to a nation in bondage. The Church in our country "grew up" in this last quarter-century as perhaps it could not, in hundred of years before it. Vatican II changed us, at first slowly, telling us of community and corresponsibility, of mission and ministry, of going out to meet a newly-emerging world: the world of the future that is being born on our planet.

The history of 27 years has been an awakening to what "being Church" means for us. "Being Church," not in the abstract, but within the very concrete moment of history we are traversing. "Being Church" within our own people's perilous pilgrimage in that crossing of time and place and consciousness which is the stuff of our nation's life.

This journey, for the Church in the Philippines, can be said to have passed through four "stages." Some have spoken of four "bus stops." But stages or bus-stops, we must remember that each phase has become part of what came later. There has not been discontinuity, but development; growth, not disjointed bursts of life.

The "titles of the chapters" in our itinerary might be given this way: There have been "four turnings":

— the turning to people;
— the turning to the poor;
— the turning to prayer;
— the turning to the politics of peacemaking!

TURNING TO "THE PEOPLE"

The re-emergence of the biblical name, "the people of God," was hailed as a major breakthrough, in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. If perhaps in the last two decades, meanings were given to this term that the Scriptures would not support, — yet we cannot forget that it is a fundamental biblical concept: not an ideological one. The "stress on people" was a stress on community, on relationships, on people, on persons. People were the Church before its structures and its institutions. Community and its relationships, dialogue and its exchanges, people knowing and loving and helping and serving people, — the Church was about this, before laws laid down and power exercised. The cursillos of Christianity carried the first waves of Vatican II euphoria. Not within our boundaries alone, but all over Asia. The Christian Family Movement reached its highpoint, in the immediate post-Vatican decade: the family is the domestic church, after all, and here, if anywhere, the Christ-life must flourish in joy.

To "turn to people" is to make real, to "real-ize" the great imperatives of communion and participation. These are permanent imperatives, and without doubt, the emergence of Basic Christian Communities (or better, Basic Ecclesial Communities) all over the world, and slowly, in our country, would become the principal vehicle of "giving substance" to corresponsibility, charisms, lay ministries, the "actualizing" of the sensus ecclesiae, the "sense of being Church" among so many of the laity, especially the young.

Whether Basic Ecclesial Communities are the way of the future, we cannot say for sure. They hold much promise within them, but ambiguities too. Nor must we forget a multitude of other new, Spirit-filled initiatives, groups and movements in the Church, and how much the Church in our country is growing in them and through them. Here, in "turning to people," the Church in the Philippines has already taken great strides, despite what some activists will say. We have much, very much, still to do; but we are truly on our way.
TURNING TO THE POOR

If we turned to people truly, flesh and blood people in our midst, we turned to the poor. "Poor, not as far as cultural tradition, human values and religious insight are concerned. In these things of the spirit, they are immensely rich." (I am citing from a 1974 declaration of the first Bishops' Institute for Social Action, held in Novaliches, in our Archdiocese.) "But our people are poor in this sense: the overwhelming majority of them are deprived of access to the material goods they need for a truly human life. They live under economic and social and political structures which have injustice built into them."

Our people are poor; by the grace of the dictatorship, they have become poorer still. FABC I, in its final statement, told us that it was from the midst of the poor, from the center of their powerlessness, but also from the heart of their human potential, their aspirations and hopes, from there, Christ was calling the Church of Asia. To turn to the poor with the Gospel was a challenge to be, like Christ, one with them in all their suffering, but also into their dreaming and struggling for the future — of decency, of honor and respected human rights, or work worthy of men and women who are sons and daughters of a Father in Heaven.

Again, despite what extremists will cry out, the 27 years which have gone by have truly marked our Church with the "turning to the poor." Pauperes evangelizantur has been translated into deeds, not just sayings. And in turn, the poor have taught us the meaning of the Gospel. Never before have so many been involved in the lives and struggles of the poor: most in ways fostered by the Church, some in alliances which are at best ambiguous, sometimes naive and dangerous. But we must put our trust in the wisdom of the Spirit, and the power of the Gospel itself. But perhaps only in few places has that lapidary saying of the Bishops' Synod of 1971 been so truly brought to bear on the life of the Church: "Action in behalf of justice, and participation in the transformation of the world, fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension in the preaching of the Gospel."

Once again, I must say we are far from where we must still go, but the summons of the Lord has not fallen on deaf ears. The Gospel will be preached, more and more, we trust, to the poor, and the poor will help us, more and more, to rediscover the Gos-
pel in all its power. The generations of the young who have begun
to take so seriously, as laypeople in society, what "being Church"
means, are there as our hope, that the Church will bring the Gos-
pel into all the dimensions of our national life. But the Gospel,
not secular ideology; Christ and his ways of non-violence, and
love, — active love, which will build a civilization of love, in con-
verted hearts, not over the blood and bones of our young.

TURNING TO PRAYER

Religion is "at its deepest core" about the Lord’s presence to
us and our presence to him. And when we grow "horizontally"
in life and action, we must grow too, "vertically" and in depth, in
prayer. If our ecclesial growth is from the Spirit, this will have to
happen. It was not a surprise, then, that years of community and
mission of activism for justice, should awaken in hearts the demand
for prayer, for contemplation, for "radication" in faith. This was
not a turning back, but a deepening, a meeting of an even more
"radical" need.

The "charismatic explosion" took place among us too; it is
beginning, I believe, to "settle down" now. Prayer-groups, Scrip-
ture study-circles, young people seeking, deeper silence and con-
templation, retreats, — as all over the world, so in the Philippines,
too, the breath of the Spirit has been felt.

Popular religiosity has surfaced again, and we are learning to
see it with new eyes. Is it 90% of our Catholics, in our country,
whose Catholic faith finds vehicle and expression mainly in "popu-
lar piety"? Theologians of the liberal community find this next to
meaningless, but we as pastors cannot agree with them. Popular
piety is the most obvious way that the ordinary people have "in-
culturated" their faith. That piety must be seen as the dwelling
place of the Spirit, among the humble, ordinary people who, in
our land above all, make up so much of the real Church: of the
poor towards whom God himself looks with "preferential love."

The "revival of prayer" carries its ambiguities, for sure. Narrow-
minded fundamentalism, thinly-disguised anti-Catholic proselytism,
political instrumentalization, by right and left, find in the prayer-
movements an open field. We must be on our guard. But the last
word here is not pessimism, but a rejoicing in the power of the
Holy Spirit. For he comes, not so much in the shouting of assem-
bles, but in the thousands and thousands of hearts who have opened themselves to conversion, to commitment, to the calling of the Lord in their own deep spirit, to the challenge of the Cross: to give their lives that others may live, that God may be God in today's world.

TURNING TO THE POLITICS OF PEACE-MAKING

As we come to our "last chapter" I must say, by way of foreword: when I speak of the Church turning to the political areas of life and action, I mean primarily our laypeople. I do not wholly exclude the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious, of course. But I believe firmly that the political is the field of the laity as their own domain. The Church teaches this, I trust we all agree.

Secondly, if one refers to the so-called "activism of the hierarchy" in the latter years of the dictatorship, we must insist on the truth that that "activism" (if it was truly that) was something forced upon the hierarchy by the situation, by events, by the deteriorating human rights and corruption state-of-affairs, by people asking us to take stands in the name of morality, in the name of the Gospel.

"Critical collaboration" had been our stand, from the beginning of martial law. For some it was more critical than collaboration from the beginning; for others, to the end, it was more collaboration than criticism. Proletarianism is both announcement and denunciation. As situations called for, some segments of the Church increasingly chose one or the other. Towards the end, except for some notable exceptions, it became denunciation all the way. The celebrated statement on the "unparalleled fraud" and frustration of the people's will, given on Valentine's Day in 1986, was the high point of that opposition. Today we return to our formula of "critical collaboration"; the Church is never yielded over to any regime. We are "the King's good servants, but always, God's first. God's above all."

One word must be said, to those who hold deep-seated bias against "the Church as institution," the institutional church. Our recent history has proven decisively that in times of tyranny it is often the only bulwark of justice and the rights of people. Both in Poland and in the Philippines the facts have borne this out: it is a good lesson to keep in the back of our minds.
During the difficult years of martial law we learned that proclaiming the Gospel of human dignity and human rights, not in the abstract, but in very concrete and complex situations, calls often for difficult discernment, in the Spirit. It calls for courage, which must also proceed from the Spirit. The Gospel is not given to us by the crucified Lord to be hidden away in sacristies and museums. Rather it is a word that must be spoken in the midst of people’s real lives and sufferings. The word of redemption is for people who await it in the darkness of distress, even of despair. It is there, in that darkness, that we must cry out: “Listen, lift up your eyes, for God is here to redeem you.”

This was the word the people heard at EDSA, in the streets, during our February revolution, when in hundreds of thousands they poured out to create, for one hundred shining hours, a revolution for peace, with the ways and weapons of peace. There we knew the prayers of the poor were being answered by the God who cannot turn the poor away. There we knew that our Marian Year, with its call to conversion and repentance, to consecration of life and a cry for Mary’s supplication, had not been in vain. “People power was prayer power,” President Aquino was to say later, again and again.

But now our people must build “a new house of democracy and freedom.” It is no longer our part to stand, as bishops and priests, on the front lines of the political struggle. The laypeople are there, and our task is to help them to be there as faithful to the Gospel, as well-informed and convinced that in the social teaching of the Church there are guidelines and wisdom for “the things that are to our peace.” We place our trust and our hope in them. Theirs is the task of reconciliation, of prosperity in justice, of creating enduring peace. More and more we must summon the laity to be the Church in public and professional life, to actualize the gifts of their baptism, the charisms of the Spirit that are theirs. In the years to come we trust “the new shape of the Church” will be decisively marked by the presence and action of a laity with a profound ecclesial spirit, and a dedication to the Cross of our Lord.

CONCLUSION

These thoughts are shared with you as part of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Pontificio Collegio Filippino. This
great institution is here in Rome at the service of our Church, for
the final formation of priests who will be learned ministers of our
people. How important a task, this college has, now more than
ever! For this hour, in our country, calls for a Church with vision,
with a leadership that must be worthy of the challenge of our time.
This leadership is that of service, we know, service above all in the
shaping of a laity which will have love for the Church, — a deep,
self-giving, dedicated love, able to cope with the age’s unprece-
dented imperatives, brave enough and humble enough to dream
great dreams, but also to do the thousand little tasks that any
building of the future must involve.

As I end, I turn to our Lady of Peace and Safe Journeying, she
whose image stands in the chapel of the collegio on Via Aurelia,
even as she stands on the Tipolo tree, in her shrine across the seas.
Our people’s proudest name, I think is that of “pueblo amante de
Maria”: a people whose love for Mary is a special distinction and
honor. We turn to Our Lady and our hopes and struggles for peace,
we place in her hands. We Filipinos have a fierce filial love for her,
and in turn we know she will always be by our side, no matter
what will come upon our land and upon our people. Always, al-
ways, we can count on her motherly graciousness, the love of her
Immaculate Heart.

When Pope John 23rd blessed our Collegio, he spoke these
words: “Aquae multae non potuerunt extinguere caritatem.”
Many waters cannot extinguish the fire of love. In the past 27
years there have been floods and the rush of many waters, washing
over our land. But with Our Lady on our side, they have never
overwhelmed us. Like the galleons on which Nuestra Señora de la
Paz sailed, our ship has not been wrecked nor has it run aground.
We will go forward then, in confidence, to the tomorrow which
awaits us, to the tomorrow we must build together.

We ask only from our Lord, and the Father in heaven, that —
with Mary interceding for us — we may never be lacking in fidelity
to the Gospel, in fierce devotion to the Church that is Christ’s
body, and his beloved bride. That we may always have his love and
his grace, a grace no waywardness will destroy, a love no waters
can ever wash away.

I conclude by reciting the National Hymn of our Eucharistic
Congress on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Internation-
al Eucharistic Congress held in Manila in 1937.
No más amor que el tuyo
O Corazón divino!
El pueblo Filipino
Te da su corazón.
En templos y en hogares
Te invoque nuestra lengua
Tu reinarás sin mengua
De Aparri hasta Joló.

Ha tiempo que esperamos
Tu imperio en el Oriente.
La fe de Filipinas
Es como el sol ardiente
Como la roca firme
Inmensa como el mar.
La iniquidad no puede
Ser de estas islas dueña
Que izada en nuestros montes
Tu celestial enseña
Las puertas del infierno
No prevalecerán.

Thank you very much!