My purpose here is to pick a quarrel, neither with his Eminence nor with the last Synod of Bishops, but with ourselves! And to do this, I intend to pick up from where they left off and also from what possibly was left out. For I feel there are certain implicit assumptions in the synodal document which could with profit be explicitated even more fully and from which we can deduce further conclusions for directions in our corporate pastoral action regarding not only the laity’s but as well the whole Church’s socio-political involvement.

I will be brief. And for our purposes, I would like to focus discussion on these four points: (1) social transformation as the overarching element in our various approaches; (2) power, the raison d'être of politics; (3) the differential roles of clergy and laity in the area of politics; and (4) the specific choice of non-violence as the Church’s mode of political action. I will add a fifth point by way of summary: the special contribution of the Philippine Church, of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) especially, to the advancing of the argument on the subject.

1. Social Transformation

By social transformation I mean making the necessary changes in societal structures — correcting them if they are vitiated, improv-

*Bishop Claver was the reactor to the paper of Cardinal Jaime L. Sin, Archbishop of Manila, during the echo-seminar on the Synod on the Laity held in Rome, in October 1987. (See preliminary note in the preceding article, p. 238.) Cardinal Sin’s paper on “Socio-political Involvement of the Laity” was circulated to the participants prior to the meeting and will be published in the Acts of the seminar. Cardinal Sin participated in the Synod as one of the Philippine representatives.
ing them if they are already good, strengthening them if they are weakening — all to the end that the better attainment of the common good is assured. There is no question that the synodal document endorses this kind of transformation or conversion as part of the mission of the Church (cf. prop. nos. 4, 16 and 20). But reading through the document, I get the feeling that this is only a secondary element of that same mission, secondary, that is, to personal spiritual sanctification (cf. prop. nos. 24 and 25). There is, I am afraid, underlying the document's thrust, a subtle dichotomization of the personal and the social, the primacy of the former quite unquestioned.

I guess the point I'd like to make here is simply that personal conversion and social transformation are not two separate ends of Christian mission but one, mirroring the basic fact that humans are not only persons but also and essentially social beings. If this were not so, then there is not much point in Christ's making the mandate of charity the primary law of His Kingdom. To put it starkly, then, the striving to change human, social relationships (structures, that is), to imbue them with the Gospel values of justice and charity, to make them more conducive to and productive of the common good — this likewise is of the essence of Christian mission and is mandated on all, both as individuals and as communities, as laity and as clergy. And since justice is the conditio sine qua non of any real change in society, the work for justice must be an ordinary, honest-to-goodness, day-to-day task of the Church, not something we do now and then — or relegate only to acid-tongued faultfinders among us.

2. Political Power

In the acceptance of social transformation as part of the Church’s mission, it follows — or should follow — that Christians have the capability of bringing about that transformation. Or if they do not, they must develop it and use it for the purposes of the Kingdom. That capability is, whether you like it or not, power — and indeed political power: the ability (and the art) of moving people to act for common ends, for the common good especially. This power includes politics in the narrow sense, the partisan kind, the acting on people to get them to embrace and support particular ideologies, programs and parties aimed at attaining specific ends; and
politics in the wider sense too, the influencing of people to work in concert for the common good, regardless of their brand of partisanship. Pope John Paul II, I understand, used the term la política for the former, lo político for the latter, in his talks at Puebla in 1978.

The synodal document does not explicitly define political power as we do here nor, following the definition, advert to the purpose and use of politics as the attaining of the common good. But I believe its whole tenor is in the direction we have just described (note especially prop. no. 20). For greater clarity and for purposes of catechesis, it should be explicitated much more.

3. The Roles of Clergy and Laity

By tradition we have accepted a differential reading of the roles of clergy and laity in the area of politics. And the differentiation is along the lines of Pope John Paul’s distinction noted above: la política is the domain of the laity, lo político that of the clergy. The document of the 1987 Synod re-echoes the distinction. Thus in prop. no. 22, it lays down the rule that the pastor’s job is to enunciate general principles (lo político); the laity is to act in direct political (partisan) action according to those principles (la política).

It is a valid rule of thumb, prudent, common-sensical, especially in the light of the high visibility of Churchmen — hierarchy and clergy — as the official leaders and spokesmen of the institutional Church.

The problem with such a clear-cut distinction of lo político as against la política, and the assigning of roles according to the distinction, is that in real life the demarcating boundaries between the two often get blurred and confused in the extreme. Just one example from our own experience as a Conference: When we issued our statement on the presidential election in February of 1986, there was no way we could avoid getting enmeshed in partisan politics. Our stand was clearly against Marcos and for Aquino, no matter how we avoided naming names. In other words we were politically partisan. But saying that, I hasten to add: We were also and clearly partisan first and foremost on the moral level (lo político) when we stood up for truth, honesty, justice. It was only when we sided with the victims of untruth, dishonesty and injustice that we became politically partisan.
This nuancing was not lost on our people, by and large, and our statement hence stands as an example and model of discernment on the proper roles of clergy and laity even in highly ambiguous situations. I think that such an attempt at this kind of nuancing would have tremendously enhanced the synodal document.

4. Non-Violence

Non-violence is expressly endorsed by the 1987 Synod as the way of the laity’s, or for that matter the whole Church’s, action in the political field (cf. prop. no. 26). I find this especially significant in view of our traditional moral theology on the just war question — reiterated to a large extent by the second of two SCDF documents on liberation theology in 1986. In that document the Sacred Congregation came out with a preference for “passive resistance” even as it rehashed the usual arguments for the use of violence. The Synod is silent on our traditional teaching on the morality of violence and instead, practically apodictically, sets forth non-violence as the norm of our action in matters of politics, whether in the narrow or the broad sense of the term. I repeat, this is a highly significant development in the Church’s expressed pastoral approach to the work for justice.

At another level, the Synod’s endorsement of non-violent politics is also an endorsement of the democratic style of conducting public affairs: We do not cut off heads simply because their owners espouse different political views from ours. Simple as the argument sounds, it says plenty to us in the Philippines in the light of our current practice of elections. If we are serious about wanting to change that practice, we better begin pushing for the development of a truly non-violent mentality in politics and in the wider work for justice. Again, I make reference to our benchmark letter of February 1986. We came out unequivocally then for non-violent change. If we did so in the extraordinary context of a revolution, I do not know why we should not do the same in the ordinary one of the conduct of our public affairs.

5. Our Contribution as CBCP

I have referred above twice to our pastoral letter of February 1986 as a very pertinent exemplar of action on two areas of the
Church’s political action, to wit, in the differentiating of roles of clergy and laity in politics and the non-violent approach to the same. There is a third way in which our letter and the pastoral outlook on politics that it takes is, collective modesty aside, an outstanding model — something that we ourselves perhaps have not appreciated fully for its implications — not only for reflection on our current subject but for action on it by the Church at large. I can only call it a way of being Church.

Shortly after the revolution, Monsignor George Higgins, the well-known labor specialist at the Catholic University of America, wrote a column (I can’t remember exactly what magazine he wrote it for) in which he extolled our statement and focused on one aspect of it — that part where we said:

And if in faith they (the people) see things as we the bishops do, we must come together and discern what appropriate actions to take that will be according to the mind of Christ. In a creative, imaginative way, under the guidance of Christ’s Spirit, let us pray together, reason together, decide together, act together, always to the end that the truth prevail, that the will of the people be fully respected.

And he pointed out, correctly I thought, that what these words exemplified was a genuinely Vatican II Church: dialogic, participative, co-responsible. Perhaps the whole Philippine Church is not really quite that, but if we take our words at face value, I think we can confidently say, they do accurately indicate the direction we are moving towards. And if that is so, I submit we are far on the way — possibly farther than we give ourselves credit for — to the practical as well as theoretical solving of many of the hard difficulties inherent in the ticklish question of Church and politics.

QUESTIONS

In conclusion, I would like to note that my comments on the Synod’s final statement are centered on these questions: (1) the discussion on social transformation is basically asking — and answering — the question of what the Church’s socio-political involvement is all about; (2) the use of political power is concerned with the why of our involvement; (3) the problem of the roles of clergy and laity comes down to who the actors are in that involvement; (4) the perspective of non-violence says how we are to involve ourselves in the solving of socio-political problems; and (5)
the after-thought on our contribution as CBCP in a way answers two questions, namely, the where and the when of our involvement.

These what-why-who-how-where-when questions are not really all that airtight and exclusive, and the fact simply brings out this other fact: That the socio-political involvement of the Church is a complex matter of putting faith and life into an integrated synthesis, a constant task, and for this spiritual discernment, just as constant, is a must. And that, I believe, is what we are trying to do here — even now.