INTRODUCING THE EXHORTATION: THE CBCP JUBILEE EXHORTATIONS

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CBCP pastoral letters, exhortations, statements — the various genres of episcopal documents — have, over the past 50 years, tended to be topical and short: topical, to meet specific and current issues in an attempt at relevancy; and short, to fit the time usually allotted to the Sunday homily.

Now and then, however, when the bishops felt a particular subject needed lengthier and fuller development, longer documents were issued. When this was done, shorter versions would usually accompany them. Even so, the danger has always been that the longer documents would not be read at all and be given the attention the bishops felt they should have. Lately, that danger has been compounded by the frequency with which statements have been made at each CBCP meeting. These past few years, it has not been unusual for the Conference to issue three or more statements each time they meet, depending on what the various commissions propose for the collective voice of the bishops to be heard on.

(There is a ready explanation for the greater frequency of CBCP statements in recent years: During the time of martial law, the bishops were quite sensitive about who spoke for them as a body, especially on
matters that touched what most people would call political — martial law itself, for instance, and its conduct, justice and human rights questions, elections, etc. And they insisted that only the Conference itself in plenary assembly should speak for them and only after due discussion on every issue and voting on written statements. Although things are much more relaxed now and the Permanent Council has been granted the power to make statements and approve pastoral letters in-between the biannual meetings when they are deemed necessary, most bishops still wait for the convening of CBCP plenary assemblies to present matter for corporate action and speaking out on.)

The danger alluded to above notwithstanding, the bishops still decided unanimously to write a series of full-length pastoral exhortations, one every year since 1997, in preparation for the Great Jubilee in the year 2000.

The first exhortation, in 1997, dealt with Philippine politics. The second, in 1998, was on the country’s economy. The third, this year, zeroed in on our common culture. And the fourth and last — it was meant for next year but may be issued late this year so it can be reflected on all through the year of the Jubilee — on Filipino spirituality.

The four documents are fairly well developed treatises averaging 25 pages each. They are not meant for pulpit reading but for reference and discussion by study groups at all levels of the Church, by BECs and mandated organizations, by priests, religious and seminarians, by educators and catechists, etc. Towards this end, the four exhortations will be issued later in book form and each will be furnished with study guides and questions to help in their discussion and deepening.

It was at one meeting of the Permanent Council in late 1996 that the idea of writing these exhortations was first conceived. Actually, only one was thought of — a letter on the subject of the economy. APEC (the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference) had taken place in October that year and it was the hard questions raised on the globalization of the economy in the wake of the Conference that made the
Permanent Council come to its decision. But before they could present the proposal to the bishops in the CBCP meeting in January 1997, a bishop made another proposal: Rather than just one, the CBCP should think of issuing four — one for each year in the run-up to the Great Jubilee in the year 2000.

Pope John Paul had earlier come out with his own exhortation, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA), in which he challenged the whole Church with its double theme of renewal and re-evangelization. The question was posed to Archbishop Cruz, CBCP President, and the Permanent Council: "Why not come up with a full length document each year on a major area of Philippine life with a view to renewing the Church’s evangelizing of those areas along the ideas that John Paul spoke of in his TMA exhortation?" They agreed. And when the proposal was made at the CBCP meeting in January 1997 to do the four pastoral exhortations, the bishops accepted it quite enthusiastically.

I was asked to form and head a committee of writers that would be responsible for the papers. Such a committee was never formed, and, of course, never headed! Instead four bishops were tasked each with one of the four papers to be written: Bishop Bacani was given the first, on politics; Archbishop Quevedo the second, on economics; Archbishop Legazpi the fourth, on spirituality. I assigned myself the third, on culture. For the writing of each paper, recourse was made to all kinds of experts and other knowledgeable people. Former COMELEC and other government officials, the UP School of Economics and business people, the Institute of Church and Social Issues, seminaries and their faculties, the Loyola School of Theology especially — these were among the many that I know were approached by the various authors to help in the writing of their assignments.

Except for the first paper on politics the composing of which started after the January 1997 CBCP meeting and got issued eight months later in September, each of the other three was given a whole year for writing, editing and approval. First drafts were sent to all the bishops...
and the plan was for them to consult as widely as possible with their people in parishes and BECs and their comments and suggestions would then be used in the drawing up of the second drafts. These corrected drafts were what the bishops during their plenary meetings at Tagaytay considered for final review and approval.

The exhortation on politics which was timed to come out before the 1998 general elections caused a little stir because of its timely topic and appearance. The next two on economics and culture, however, have not seemed to cause much of a ripple. The fourth exhortation on Filipino spirituality, the original written in Tagalog, might by its very novelty attract a little more attention. The seeming waning of interest with each issuance of the pastoral exhortations is paralleled by the response of the dioceses in the consultation stage. The first exhortation drew the most suggestions when the dioceses were invited to comment on it, the later three getting less and less. The reason could well be that politics is a subject Filipinos are most expert at and economics, culture and spirituality do not carry as much appeal. But it could also be from sheer ennui — it took too much effort to read lengthy papers, one following closely after another, and papers the subjects of which were quite esoteric to most of our people.

Still, the four areas chosen as the subjects of the four exhortations are all vital for the renewal that Pope John Paul II talks about in TMA. They are meant not for ordinary pulpit reading but for deeper and wider study — critical, reflective, prayerful — at all levels of the Church. If this were done, perhaps, just perhaps, a measure of renewal in the Philippine Church life will take place and the faith will become a more potent factor in the coming millenium for the lessening — if not curing — of the many social ills that make our people’s proud Christianity less proud.