

Catholic Political Involvement in the Philippines

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Catholic Social Teaching affirms that the Gospel of Christ benefits the whole human person (body, mind and spirit) and all human practices: economic, political, cultural and educational. Thus, every field of human activity is a field of evangelization, which bears the Gospel as leading source of visionary light.

Politics is a vital area of evangelization because it can lead people to the common good or can dehumanize by entrapping them in practices and procedures that violate or degrade human dignity. Politics should protect and not degrade human dignity, which flows from God's decision to create human beings, male and female, in the divine image (Genesis 1:27).

In the gospels, Christ fed and satisfied people in their hunger for food, wisdom and compassion. He also declared that whatever we did, or failed to do, for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the abandoned, or the needy stranger, we did or failed to do for him (Matthew 25:31-46). In our times, believers who help generate good and steady jobs for the unemployed, or who raise the employment or entrepreneurial skills of the poor, are serving Christ the Lord himself, whose image or face is mysteriously present in every person in need.

Good Politics

Good and wise politics creates the stable environment of rules and regulations for entrepreneurial activities, the creation and maintenance of decent jobs, and the administration of justice. Politics is the practice and art of governance of the citizens for the common good. It includes the administration of public resources such as tax money and public land, buildings and equipment.

The common good is what preserves or promotes the basic human dignity of everybody, whether one belongs to a minority or a majority group in society. Thus, for example, a government recognizes the human right of equal protection of law for every citizen, whether poor or rich, man or woman of whatever ethnic or religious group, especially in cases where life, liberty or property is at stake. No person ought to be deprived by government of what is his or hers without due process. No innocent person ought to spend years in prison awaiting the wheels of justice which, unfortunately in the Philippines and many developing countries, turn most slowly for the financially poor and those with poor political connections.

Politics is also the art of resolving with fairness the conflicts of interests among groups in society. For example, there tends to be a conflict between, on the one hand, the interest of wage-workers of enterprises who want higher wages or better benefits, and on the other hand, the interest of investors who want a profitable or higher return of their investments. Also, the interest of Filipino lowlanders to utilize or develop more land and natural resources conflicts often with the interest of indigenous groups of highlanders

who want to preserve their ancestral lands and resources. Politics is a reasonable means to resolve such conflicts without resorting to violence.

Besides the common good, other purposes of the political community of citizens and public authorities are the protection of rights and the creation of effective opportunities for everybody to play an active part in public affairs.¹

Decades of Poverty and Decadent Politics

Unfortunately, in the exercise of politics in the Philippines for decades, the common good is not targeted or achieved in many instances, the conflicts of interests in society are not resolved fairly or wisely, and major political decisions are reached without sufficient participation from groups who are most vulnerable to the negative effects of the decisions. The benefits of political decisions and actions go more to the few rich and those who have strong political patrons or connections, while the burdens or costs of the decisions are borne more by the many who are poor or poorly connected.

Owing to the established or dominant political and economic practices and procedures, there is great inequality of opportunity for a life of dignity in the country. Most of the poor have seen little or no improvement in their social condition from one generation to the next, and they see the regular practice of elections in a democracy as occasions for momentary relief from misery through the money or goods handed out by many candidates. Or elections are seen as no different from popular games of chance which can be exciting or entertaining even when people do not expect the games to change their lives in the long term.

There is also unequal opportunity for political office, and most of the top elective positions are won by members of a few established families, clans or dynasties. In several locales, dynasties allocate huge resources for bribing election personnel and hiring goons to intimidate voters and to inflict violence on opponents. Thus, many Filipinos generalize politics and politicians as dirty or corrupt.

The Church considers politics both a difficult and noble art, and thus encourages those with talent or potential to prepare themselves for the practice of politics and to engage in political activity with integrity and wisdom.² A Christian who neglects one's duties as a citizen and political actor on earth neglects one's duties toward the neighbor and thus puts one's heavenly citizenship at risk.³

Integral Evangelization

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) asserts that an urgent part of the mission of Catholic citizens is to evangelize politics, to transform politics in the light of the Gospel, or to nurture Gospel values such as justice, compassion and humility within the political field.⁴ This is part of the mission of integral evangelization or the evangelization of the whole person and all human life and activity.⁵

Integral evangelization in the Philippines requires a Church transformed into a “Church of the Poor,” a Church that is pro-poor for the sake of the common good and God’s Reign. In such a renewed Church, “the Church will not only evangelize the poor...the poor in the Church will themselves become evangelizers. Pastors will learn to be with, work with and learn from the poor.”⁶

Church as Teacher and Learner

As an agent of integral evangelization, the Church is both a teacher and a learner in the world, and in the understanding and improvement of human dignity and social life. As a learner, the Church as the whole people of God has the task “to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times,”⁷ including non-religious voices from the fields of politics, economics, and the natural sciences. Also, the Church appreciates the presence of truth, goodness or justice in non-religious institutions.

The Church recognizes that “justice, peace and integral development can be pursued through many political ways,” and the Gospel does not prescribe a particular political system for Christians, “whether monarchical, presidential, (or) parliamentary.”⁸ Christians should recognize the legitimacy of different points of view as regards the organization of political, economic, educational and cultural activities.

Separation of Church and State

The Church is teacher and learner towards the political community but is neither a ruler nor an agency of the State. “The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields.”⁹

The Philippine bishops accept the constitutional principle of the separation of Church and State, but considers the principle misinterpreted by those who expect the Church to become silent on matters of politics, politicians, and public policies. Separation of Church and State should not mean the loss of the public voice of the Church and the confinement of religion either to the individual conscience or to worship activities.

What separation of Church and State correctly implies are the following: the State has no official religion; the State shall not discriminate against any religion, whether of the minority or the majority; no Church or religious group or organization may exercise control over the police or armed forces of the State. For integral or total human development of all persons in society, honest and prudent dialogue between Church and State is necessary, while they maintain their proper separation or independence.

The mission of the Church and the purpose of the political community to promote the common good partially coincide, and thus respectful and mutual collaboration between them can be pursued. Critical discernment, however, has to be practiced to ensure that, in the mutual collaboration of Church and State, the credibility and autonomy of the Church are not weakened.

Integral Development

Integral development is the major goal of the evangelization of politics. Such human development requires the "creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility,"¹⁰ and the pursuit of people empowerment, people's "greater involvement in decision-making, greater equality in both political and economic matters, more democracy, more participation."¹¹ Besides people empowerment and the pursuit of the common good, three other principles should characterize Filipino Catholic participation in politics: defense and promotion of justice, a spirit of service, and a love of preference for the poor.¹²

Feminist Christians point out that the institutional church would be much more effective in its advocacy and efforts to pursue people empowerment and to create structures of participation, if it gave up outdated structures that secure the monopoly of a celibate male clergy over policy-making within the church. "The church, steeped in male hierarchy and tradition, has to repent for its sexism before it can be a beacon of hope and an agent for change."¹³ Sexism is the tacit or explicit conviction that, by nature or by divine decree, one sex is superior over the other sex in terms of human dignity, wisdom, or inner strength.

Principled Partisan Politics

To avoid harmful division within the community of believers, the Church directs bishops, religious and priests to refrain from partisan politics, especially the use of the pulpit or the Eucharistic celebration for partisan purposes, whether for or against a particular political leader, family, or party. Instead, competent and conscientious lay men and women are strongly encouraged to get involved directly in "principled partisan politics."¹⁴

From historical experience, the Philippine Church recognizes that there can be rare junctures in history when a primarily moral judgment its officials pass about a political event is unavoidably partisan. This is what happened when the CBCP declared that the 1986 elections were fraudulent and thus the authoritarian president, Ferdinand Marcos, had no moral basis to extend his rule for another term.¹⁵

To prepare Catholic citizens for principled participation in politics, whether partisan or not, the basic work that has to be done is "catechesis on politics" or Christian education in politics.¹⁶ Such education can take place in the family, the Catholic educational institution, the parish, a base community, a covenant community or a religious organization.

Missionary Aspect

Catholic political education has to include and develop "the missionary aspect of the Church's social doctrine."¹⁷ Catholic political actors who understand this missionary

aspect will proclaim explicitly their faith in Christ, when there are opportune times in their political activities.

Scripture says: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15) Thus, every Catholic political actor should be prepared to proclaim one’s faith with both conviction and humility, and with respect for the religious freedom of others, but not during inopportune times so that one’s faith proclamations do not end up like pearls thrown to pigs (Matthew 7:6).

Specific Ways of Political Participation

Principled political participation can be pursued by Catholic citizens in many specific ways. Some can join and be active in civil society groups or citizens organizations that pursue the following: popular education on the rights and duties of citizenship; education of citizens on responsible voting; education of candidates on principled political leadership; election monitoring and evaluation.

Other ways are the following: monitoring the performance of elective officials; monitoring government procurement and service delivery; monitoring the process of deliberation of bills in the legislature; advocacy work including lobbying for policies, laws, regulations and procedures that will contribute to political, economic and educational reforms and integral development.

Competent and conscientious lay Catholic citizens who have a talent or potential for elective office should consider seriously to prepare themselves in a systematic way to become candidates, or at least to campaign actively for the excellent or superior candidates.

Perhaps the next level in the evangelization of politics will have to be the building or strengthening of political parties as necessary institutions in a democracy.¹⁸ For too long, the dominant political parties in the Philippines have been personality-oriented rather than oriented to platforms or programs; they do not seriously engage in the political education of the citizenry; they are weak in party discipline and thus party-switching by politicians is done regularly.

Conclusion

Catholic involvement in politics in the Philippines has evolved through the decades toward stronger recognition of the need for political education and lay participation in principled partisan politics. Catholic education in politics has to include the missionary aspect of the political involvement of believers.

In its political involvement, the Church, the communion of the faithful, is an evangelizer of politics. This is a challenging and risky mission, but the Church ought to pursue it

because of its fidelity to Christ, its head, whose victory over sin and death offers assurance and strength to every evangelizer.

¹ *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, 74-75.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics*, section D, 16 September 1997.

⁵ Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), *Conciliar Document* (Manila: 1992), 187-92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

⁸ CBCP, *Philippine Politics*, section G-3.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

¹¹ PCP II, *Conciliar Document*, 326.

¹² *Ibid.*, 351.

¹³ Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist Theology, Southern," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 207.

¹⁴ CBCP, *Lay Participation in Politics and Peace*, 12 July 2009.

¹⁵ CBCP, *Post-Election Statement*, 13 February 1986.

¹⁶ CBCP, *Philippine Politics*, section H-1.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 15.

¹⁸ Dennis Gonzalez, "The Missing Ground in the Evangelization of Politics: Building Ideological Political Parties," *Hapag* 7 (2010): 53-62.