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State of the Nation: A Challenge to Christian Statesmanship

SAMUEL R. WILEY

AS the dust of the recent political campaign settles and the nation welcomes the incoming government with its officials both elective and appointive, it seems a fitting occasion to consider the spirit which ought to animate the Christian in public life and at the same time to delineate the chief areas of concern which will challenge the dedication and ingenuity of the Filipino who today finds himself in the mainstream of national life. For it would appear that the times call for something more than the usual brand of political accommodation, and demand that vision of the whole and that statesmanlike courage which truly places the welfare of the entire people above every lesser consideration.

As has been emphasized in a most recent pronouncement of the Second Vatican Council, the responsibility for the just and efficient organization of modern society is the most essential apostolate of the Christian layman. Pope Pius XII spoke of the apostolate of the laity in these challenging terms: "The consecration of the world is essentially the work of the laymen themselves, of men who are intimately a part of economic and social life and who participate in the government and in legislative assemblies."¹ This same principle of Christian holiness

¹ *Address of Pope Pius XII to the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate*, 6 October, 1957; English trans. from *The Catholic Mind*, vol. 56 (1958), pp. 74 ff.

was even more forcefully proclaimed in the recently promulgated Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, wherein the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stated:

The task of the laity, which springs from their own vocation, is to seek the kingdom of God in the transaction of worldly business and the godly arrangement they give it. Their life is lived in the world. It is lived in each and all of the world's occupations and employments and in the ordinary situations of the life of the family and society...they must be guided by the Christian conscience, no matter what the temporal activity in which they are involved, for not even in temporal business can any human activity be removed from God's control.²

It has always been the clear teaching of the Church that it is the duty of all citizens to work for the common good of their country. This duty is more definite and urgent under a democratic form of government, because it is the citizens themselves who choose their officials, and who thereby choose the quality of government they will receive. Thus the liberties won in the past by the struggles and the very blood of the nation's patriots can easily be squandered and lost if Christian men fail in their civic and political duties. This is all the more so when they are entrusted with the burden and responsibility of public office. Nor can the private citizen, once he has fulfilled his duty at the polls, consider that nothing more is expected of him. One must deplore the attitude of those who, disillusioned perhaps by the defeat of their own candidates, or by the malpractices of some politicians, would voice their silent protest by retiring behind the sheltered walls of their homes and compounds and allowing the nation to go on its merry way without them. This reasoning betrays ignorance or cowardice. The citizenry must remain alert at all times. Just as the Church itself, so too the individual Christian cannot remain indifferent to the material, social and spiritual welfare of the people; and in great part this will depend on enlightened political measures and prudent legislation. The ordinary citizen, if he is a true Christian layman, must be prepared by diligent inquiry and by public discussion to take an active part in guiding the conscience of his elected officials.

² *Constitutio Dogmatica De Ecclesia*, n. 31, A.A.S., vol. LVII, 1965; English trans. by The Catholic Truth Society, London, 1965, pp. 47-48.

To assist both the governing and the governed in forming a better judgment of the challenge confronting them, this seems an opportune time to sketch a few of the most urgent problems facing the nation today.

At least three areas of public policy are of paramount concern at the present time. These are the acute economic problem, the deteriorating level of public order, and the expanding demands of the education of our youth in every field, and in particular the as yet unsatisfied desire of our Catholic people for the better implementation of their constitutional right to provide for the religious education of their children in the public schools. Each of these areas deserves more than a passing mention.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEM

It is quite evident that almost all the countries of Southeast Asia are haunted by the spectacle of serious economic and social problems. At the conclusion of the First Conference of Bishops of the Far East, held in Manila in December, 1958, an official declaration was issued which stated that the bishops

deem it necessary to voice their concern at the blatant social inequalities still existing in so many of the countries of East and Southeast Asia, at the low standard of living of a great portion of the population, at the social inadequacy of the distribution of land, and at the poor conditions of employment and retribution under which so many workers are constrained to live.³

Today, more than six years later, one is forced sadly to admit that these conditions continue to prevail in the Philippines. The slow pace of economic development joined to a rapidly-rising population has contributed to aggravate the situation, so that if suitable remedies are not applied soon a chaotic phase may result where, in a spirit of indignation and open protest, the wage-earner and the tenant farmer may be led to subscribe to an extremist solution far worse in its effects than the evils it pretends to remedy. Has the nation not yet learned the lessons taught us by the Huk uprising some fifteen

³ *Official Statement of the First Conference of Bishops of the Far East, Manila, 14 Dec., 1958; cf. Boletín Ecles., 33 (1959), pp. 87-90.*

years ago? That some anxiety in this respect is not just a figment of the imagination can be ascertained readily by even a cursory glance at the social facts. The statistics speak for themselves. What is more important, they represent human beings, men whom God has called to the dignity of a Christian life and to the full participation of democratic citizenship, but who find it morally impossible to pursue the most elementary virtues under the pressure of life's hardships and privations.

In 1958-1959 a year-long survey was conducted by the National Economic Council, the Office of the Presidential Assistant on Community Development (PACD) and the Bureau of Census. A comparative study of the results of this joint effort reveals the following facts:

More than three-fourths of the population live in the rural areas and specifically in the barrios. Three out of ten barrio people have a cash earning of less than ₱100.00 per year. The average income of all the rest ranges from ₱200 to ₱300 a year. If one should ask how many rural families have even one reliable breadwinner, the answer is that only two out of five have this distinction. In other words, three out of every five families in the provinces do not have any breadwinner at all.

Consider the situation of our farmers. Of a total of 243,680 farms, some 83.7% of these farms had no irrigation during any part of the year. Despite the progress in scientific discoveries to increase the production of rice and despite the presence in our midst of one of the best-equipped rice institutes in the world at Los Baños, only one out of 20 farms practised the Masagana or Margate system of planting palay. For all their toil, our farmers find themselves starving a few weeks after the harvest. They then rush to money-lenders to tide them over, paying interest rates that may range from 100% to 2000%. Another way of viewing the problem is to consider family income and expenditure throughout the nation. With an expenditure of ₱1.00 a day per person, a family of six would need an income of ₱2190 a year. According to the data furnished by the Bureau of Census and Statistics, in 1962 more than 70% of all families in the Philippines earned less than this.

The average daily per capita expenditure of these families was about 50 centavos. If this amount was spent entirely on food, it would amount to less than 20 centavos for each meal. And if we raise the expenditure per day per person to ₱2.00, a family of six would need an income of ₱4,380 a year. According to the Bureau of Census and Statistics, in 1962 about 95% of all families in the Philippines earned less than this.

A more graphic picture of the poverty of the majority of our people is found in the Bureau of Census statistics on households. Of the more than 4,600,000 occupied dwelling units, one-third (more than two million) have no toilet facilities whatsoever; the vast majority (over four million) do not even have a radio and are dependent on wood for fuel; three-fourths of all families still rely on kerosene lamps for their illumination.⁴ Statistics therefore seem to indicate that about 90% of our families live at a mere subsistence level. It is indeed evident that a very heavy burden of responsibility rests on the higher income group and above all our legislators to alleviate as quickly as possible this harsh economic imbalance.⁵

In company with most of the world, the Philippines is experiencing the pressures that arise in a developing economy from a rapidly expanding population. From a total of 19.23 million people in 1948, the number has grown to an astonishing 30.24 million in 1963. At the present rate of increase of more than a million persons each year, the total population will have been doubled within the next twenty-three years. It is true that there has been a concomitant increase in the Gross National Product, but it must be pointed out that since 1955 the purchasing power of the peso has dropped from .33 centavos to .26 centavos in 1963 and the trend is still downward.⁶

Statistics such as these could be multiplied but enough is given to suggest that an acute social and economic problem

⁴ *Statistical Handbook of the Philippines*, 1962, pp. 105-108.

⁵ Sources of the data are the *Joint Legislative-Executive Tax Commission*, 1960; and the *Philippine Statistical Survey of Households*, April, 1962.

⁶ *Statistical Handbook of the Philippines*, pp. 40-41.

of vast proportions still confronts the nation. It cannot be wished away; neither will it yield to any magic panacea which will straightway solve all difficulties. Perhaps it would be statesmanship of a high order to educate the general public to face up to the crisis. The socio-economic problem is a complex one and demands competence and the ability to harness all the latent forces of the country in an earnest effort to solve it. Without serious bipartisan efforts on the part of Congress joined to intelligent and disinterested leadership in the executive branch, it will be impossible to forge a long-term solution acceptable to the majority of the people.

LAW AND ORDER

Among the primary responsibilities of any organized government is the maintainance of internal peace and public order. Without the strong protection of law, the community will rapidly degenerate into a human jungle, where neighbor is pitted against neighbor in a desperate fight for survival. No one who reads the press can fail to be shocked by the crimes that are daily committed in our cities and towns. It is no exaggeration to say that never in recent years have the people felt such insecurity on our streets and even in the sanctuary of their homes.

The crime of arson has destroyed much valuable property in the business sectors of our cities. Law-enforcement agencies are helpless to check it because of the antiquated nature of the arson laws and the failure of our law-makers to give the police an arson law with teeth in it. The loss to the economy is augmented by the higher insurance rates that must be payed due to the prevalence of this crime.⁷ Again the failure to act must be attributed largely to our legislators.

Recently a large prostitution ring was uncovered, wherein young girls of 14 and 15 years of age were held captive against their will and shamefully abused. What is more revolting is the fact that this sordid business could never exist on such a scale without the connivance of the local police and certain govern-

⁷ Cf. article of F. V. Tutay, "Arson Jitters," *Free Press*, (7 August 1965), pp. 7 ff.

ment officials.⁸ Abuses openly or covertly committed by the police themselves, the obvious coddling by the police of criminals who are relatives of prominent political figures, the slowness of our courts of justice—all this not only breaks down the general sense of security, but leads to a loss of respect for the forces of law and order. The cowardly reluctance to act impartially and swiftly against such 'protected' offenders eventually convinces the general populace that there is no equality before the law and that a government of men has taken the place of a government of law. The time will come when sheer desperation will force men to take the law into their own hands and in the resulting chaos, subversive forces, even now active below the surface, will be given an opportunity to seize power. Thus from simple neglect, our hard-won liberties can be lost.

That the more celebrated cases described in the daily press are not isolated incidents but represent a definite upward trend in criminality is confirmed by all available statistical data. Reliable sources indicate that since 1960 there has been a steady rise in the total volume of crime; and even more significant is the rise in the density of crime.⁹ It is an ominous fact that the percent of increase in crime has outrun the population increase. The past year has witnessed a notable upsurge in crimes against persons such as murder and sexual offenses. Whatever their differences on details, all responsible authorities admit that there is a general rising trend in crime throughout the nation.¹⁰ All likewise agree that no other single mea-

⁸ Cf. article of F. V. Tutay, "Girls for Sale", *Free Press* (28 August 1965), pp. 10 ff.

⁹ Cf. *Philippine Crime Report*. 1962-63 and 1963-64; this is an official tabulation of the National Bureau of Investigation based on police reports from 51% of the provinces. It is a sufficient percentage to project the crime index for the entire country. Based on the percent of crimes committed per 100,000 persons, it shows that during the year 1963, there was a 17.3% rise in violent crimes. The year 1964 witnessed an increase of 39.8% in all types of crime.

¹⁰ According to Philippine Constabulary statistics, the increase of crime ratio over the population during 1963-64 was 2.3 to 1 but graver crimes, especially murder contributed to the increase. There is some discrepancy between NBI and Constabulary figures, but both agree that the crime index is on the rise.

sure could contribute more to checking this rise in crime than legislation which would improve the quality of local police forces. Of the almost 30,000 policemen throughout the country, 30% have no more than an elementary school education while only 34% are even civil service eligibles. A legislative measure which was designed to improve this important area of the government, House Bill No. 8644, known as the Police Act of 1964, was passed by the lower House during the last session of Congress, but was then allowed to die in a senatorial committee which to all appearances had abdicated its primary responsibility for the security of the nation.

The nature and extent of smuggling seems to defy description. It appears to have eroded the moral fibre of many citizens and law-enforcement agencies. It threatens certain sectors of the economy and demands vigorous and effective action which will show neither fear nor favor.

THE EDUCATION OF OUR YOUTH

There is no richer source of wealth in any nation than its youth. This was recognized by Dr. Jose Rizal in one of his earliest poems, *To Filipino Youth*, whom he calls "the fairest promise of my native land."¹¹ In still another work, entitled *Education Gives Glory to our Native Land*, these perceptive lines are found:

Where Education lifts her throne,
A vigorous and lusty youth is wrought
That stamps out errors with unyielding foot,
A youth that waxes great with noble thought.
She cleaves the crest of Vice with certain stroke,
Before her visage, black crime pales distraught. . .¹²

Certainly the nation owes a debt of deep appreciation to the thousands of true lovers of its youth, the self-sacrificing teachers in all schools, both public and private, who though underpaid and often underestimated, continue to work in the most remote regions to bring the light of learning to the dawn-

¹¹ Jose Rizal, *A La Juventud Filipina*, (English trans. by Leon Ma. Guerrero in *The Young Rizal*, p. 64).

¹² *Ibid.*, *Por la Educacion Recibe Lustre La Patria*, (English trans. by Leon Ma. Guerrero, in *The Young Rizal*, p. 62).

ing intelligence of our most valuable treasure, the youth of the land. These same teachers under our current electoral process, hold in trust the efficacy of our democratic elections for it is they who preside over the local voting precincts. By and large they have merited well of the nation in this respect. But they are powerless to solve the larger issues of education.

It must be pointed out to the holders of public office and to the citizens at large, how inadequate are the present measures for the proper education of our youth. How many political leaders who appeal to Rizal in their patriotic speeches, have followed up their words with commensurate deeds in the field of public education? Despite the fact that almost 25% of the National Budget is spent annually on education, and that the written law provides for compulsory elementary education for every child at the expense of the State, every major study of our educational system since the war, admits that the basic problems remain unsolved. The most recent study was published in 1960 in a volume entitled, *A Survey of the Public Schools of the Philippines*, popularly known as the Swanson report. Its factual summaries present us with a stiff challenge. Of those children who enter the First Grade of the Elementary School, only 63% finish the Fourth Grade. Less than 40% of our elementary school pupils complete the Sixth Grade. Over 70% of all youths of high school age are not attending any high school, public or private. This means that the bulk of our youth will not be taught to be either efficient producers or capable citizens. The consequences of this for the future of our democratic system are too palpable to require further explanation.¹³

Although Congress authorized the restoration of the Seventh Grade in 1954, it did not appropriate enough money to implement this law with the result that it still remains a dead letter. The quantity of financial support for education is inadequate and the manner of its administration is uncertain. The total dependence of public elementary education on the National Government places the burden for this situation

¹³ Cf. *A Survey of the Public Schools of the Philippines* by the Joint Staff of NEC/ICA, Manila, 1960, p. 9 and pp. 34 ff.

press has a vital role to play in making our political life and governmental performance more responsive to the needs of all our people and not merely to the advantage of a favored few. Upright and sincere men who have entered the political arena from worthy motives of the common good deserve all praise. Theirs is a most Christian action, for the Christian conscience is a social conscience and one that must act to survive. Only when he is fully motivated by the spirit of Christ, will the Christian be completely a citizen of his country and a neighbor to every man in this world. More than ever today, the Christian must live out his mission in this world and reject that false and narrow concept of spirituality and the interior life which would confine him blind and mute, to the four walls of the Church or to the privacy of his household. In the words of our present Holy Father, Pope Paul VI:

let the man of today believe that Christ is even more necessary to him than in the past; in his reawakened desire for liberty, for human maturity, for social progress and for peace, let him realize that not only in order to possess these ideals, but even to know their true concept, he needs the divine Master who alone can make them coincide with truth and with life.¹⁸

Once again the peace of Asia is shattered by the cries of fratricidal stride. The Philippines is challenged to give to the world an example of enlightened Christian democracy—where issues are settled peacefully by ballots and not by bullets, where freedom of speech allows for a reasoned political dialogue, and where after the noise of the hustings has subsided, all men join together to work for the material and spiritual progress of the nation in the spirit of Christlike charity and justice.

¹⁸ Pope Paul VI, "Sermon at the Cathedral of Orvieto," 11 August 1964; English trans. in *The Pope Speaks* vol. 10, n. 1, p. 12.