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The Gospel, Human Rights, and the Church in the Philippines Today

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ANTONIO B. LAMBINO

Christianity was born to give witness to this one truth; that man possesses a dignity equal to no other on the face of the earth, a dignity which almighty God himself holds in reverence to the point of loving man unto the end, unto death on the Cross. This truth, this message is the reason for the existence of the Church, the community of believers who find life's meaning in giving witness to God's infinite respect for human dignity. Hence, the Church considers herself as servant of the Gospel that she bears for mankind. For this message the Church lives and for this message she is prepared – like her Lord – to give her life. For the message that she bears is greater than herself.

SALVATION IS FOR THE WHOLE MAN

This Gospel is addressed to man as he is in the concrete; man in his total reality as body and spirit, man in his social, political, economic, and religious life. In all areas of human existence where the dignity of the person is involved the Gospel must be preached. The Gospel “proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by him, of seeing him, and of being given over to him” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, n. 9). At the same time, evangelization must “take account of the un-

*A position paper read at the Convocation on Religious Freedom sponsored by the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines. The convocation was held at St. Scholastica's College, Manila, 7 March 1976.

ceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life, without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development – a message of liberation particularly forceful in our times" (*Ibid.*, n. 29).

THE PROMOTION OF JUSTICE IS A BASIC ELEMENT OF EVANGELIZATION

Thus it is that the promotion of justice, as the 1971 Synod of Bishops affirmed, is "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel" (*Justice in the World*, introduction). From this it follows that the defense of basic human rights without which justice would be meaningless is an essential element of the proclamation of the Christian message. "It is always and everywhere legitimate for (the Church) to preach the faith with true freedom, to teach her social doctrine, and to discharge her duty among men without hindrance. She also has the right to pass moral judgments even in matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary" (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, n. 76; cf. also Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Pastoral Letter on Evangelization and Development* [Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1973], pp. 23–31).

CHURCH AND STATE CAN COOPERATE IN THE SERVICE OF OUR PEOPLE

In the fulfilment of her mission the Church recognizes legitimate civil authority (Vatican II, *On Religious Freedom*, n. 11) and wishes to undertake her task of promoting justice within legal structures and in collaboration, albeit critical, with the State. The Church is aware that her understanding of her mission may not be readily comprehended even by men of good will, especially if they have been accustomed to thinking about religion chiefly, if not solely, in terms of "the immortal soul" rather than of the whole man as he is addressed in real life by the Gospel. Perhaps some

may even have the fear that the Church's mission to promote justice in the human community would lead to a violation of the principle of separation of Church and State. The Church wishes to assure them that she has no intention whatsoever of entering into areas properly belonging to the competence of civil authority. It is only when the inalienable dignity of the human person – who may be both citizen and believer – is at stake that the Church concerns herself with “civil affairs.” As Vatican II teaches: the basis of the relationship between the Church and world and of the dialogue between them is the dignity of the human person (*The Church in the Modern World*, n. 40). Towards a mutual understanding of the specific contributions of the Church and of the State to the promotion of justice, and towards the exploring of possible areas of common service to our people, it would be extremely helpful to open up new structures of dialogue between their respective leaders.

VIOLETIONS OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

The dignity of the human person, the promotion of justice, the defense of basic human rights – these truths and values are shared by all men of good will. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* upholds them. So does the new Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, whose preamble speaks in praise of “a regime of justice, peace, liberty and equality” and which also includes an entire article (no. IV) on the Bill of Rights. Unfortunately, declarations are not always confirmed by performance, and we would like here to specify what we believe are three instances of this non-conformity between word and action:

- (i) Presidential Decree 823, despite subsequent amendments, effectively deprives the workingman of the basic human right to strike as the ultimate means for the fulfilment of his just demands. The total ban on participation by any foreigner in trade union activities is discriminatory against labor since no effective corresponding prohibition is laid down for management. As Archbishop Jaime L. Sin strongly insisted in his letter of 12 November 1975, the objectionable provisions of P. D. 823 “stop us from performing our Christian and human duty to help the poor and the suffering.”
- (ii) The deportation without due process of two P.I.M.E. missionaries, Frs. Alessi and Cocquio, is a violation of a basic human right guaranteed by article IV, section I of the Constitution. That due process has in this case been violated can be affirmed whether some of the suspicions and

charges of the military authorities against the two missionaries are in fact valid or not. Indeed there was no possibility of justly evaluating their innocence or guilt, precisely because no fair hearing was granted and the accused had no opportunity to state their case.

(iii) The new questionnaire issued by the Commission on Immigration and Deportation for foreign missionaries who wish to extend their stay in the country contains questions which demand a self-incriminatory answer or force the petitioner to be an informant against a member of his own religious community. Moreover, some of the questions identify in too facile a manner any form of social action (especially involving workers or laborers) with illegal political activity. These aspects of the questionnaire can readily lead to infringements on the freedom of the Church to proclaim the Gospel, especially to the poor and the oppressed. With Pope Paul VI "we must note with sadness that the evangelizing work of the Church is strongly opposed, if not prevented, by certain public powers. Even in our own day it happens that preachers of God's Word are deprived of their rights, persecuted, threatened, or eliminated, solely for preaching Jesus Christ and his Gospel. But we are confident that despite these painful trials the activity of these apostles will never meet final failure in any part of the world" (Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, n. 50).

THE CHURCH MUST PREACH THE GOSPEL

The Church repeats her firm desire to work for justice within legal structures, but she can never cease under any circumstances to proclaim the Good News of God's absolute respect for the dignity of man. On the strength of the Lord's mandate, she claims for herself complete freedom to discern and to accomplish her task of spreading the Gospel to all the nations of the earth. In keeping with contemporary Christian discernment, she will count the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed as the favored beneficiaries of evangelization (cf. *Justice in the World*, introduction; Federation of Asian Bishops, Conferences, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, nn. 19-24).

... EVEN AT THE PRICE OF THE CROSS

Whether the Church will carry out her mission in cooperation with the State or in conflict with it, will ultimately depend upon the stances taken by the State. One thing is certain: the Church must proclaim the Gospel in all areas of life relevant to the dignity and the rights of man no matter what position the government may

assume in her regard. If the State should choose the path of solidarity, then the Church welcomes it to this joint task in the spirit of brotherhood. If it should choose the way of opposition or persecution, then the Church is ready to suffer for what she holds to be most precious in heaven and on earth: the Gospel that has been entrusted to her. In this she would only be following her Master who came "not to destroy the law but to fulfill it," but in the end achieved this only at the price of the Cross fashioned for Him by the leaders of the law. If events should take this turn, the Church in the Philippines can only ask from her Lord, humbly and confidently, that – despite her weakness and hesitations – He may give her the steadfastness and courage to follow "the way along which countless martyrs and other believers have walked through all ages and over all the earth" (Vatican II, *On Religious Freedom*, n. 11). And her trust will not be confounded, because it rests on the word and the faithfulness of God.