

RP Christianity: Between “Being Christian” and “Being Corrupt”

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When we entered the month of September 2003 almost all Filipinos around the world were shocked by the international news that the Philippines ranked 11th in the list of the most corrupt countries in the world and 3rd in Asia.¹ Some were saddened by the condition of our country because the integrity and identity of the Philippines were exposed to shame in the eyes of the world. Of course that exposition was an evidence that corruption has really been a part of the Philippine culture. This is not to exclude our justice system that serves the vested interest of those who have the power and the influence.

Corruption in the Philippine politics has been embedded in our culture even before the Philippine liberation from the Japanese occupation of the country. I am glad that the news about the Philippine corruption was broadcasted around the world. My delight was not because I hate Filipinos. Rather it is my hope that the international news might serve as a critic to our government and remind us of our failures.

The most harmful thing to me after hearing that bad news was the paradox that exists in the Philippine culture, namely a country that is known as the only Christian nation in the Far East on the one hand, and corrupt on

¹ Last January 2005, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) ranked the Philippines as the 2nd most corrupt country in the world. *Eds.*

the other hand. The common thinking about the term “Christian” is associated with the believer of God and Jesus Christ, the savior. The Bible is the authority (or one of the many for Roman Catholics) of faith and living. As believers of the Bible, Christians are expected to live out the sacred principles that promote wholeness and call everyone to submit to the authority of God. That is, that the “understood expectation” of the people around the world who know our country is for us to live the ideals of the Christian faith. That same expectation from a Christian nation implies that the Christian culture and are tradition supposedly characterized as a God-conscious and God-fearing culture and tradition. As such, ideally a Christian nation like the Philippines is not expected to be in the list of the top corrupt nations in the world. Obviously, such an image contradicts the characteristics of being Christian.

Because corruption has been a part of our culture, in my view, Filipino Christianity has never been successful in maintaining the Christian tenets of faith. Does this mean that Filipino religiosity in this generation is inadequate to impede because corruption is a part of life? Does this suggest that the desire for survival takes priority over Christian values when one is compelled to make a choice? Must Christian morality then be located in the periphery because after all it becomes dysfunctional in a system and culture of corruption?

The above questions disturb me much. However, chronologically, there is a reason to argue that in the Philippines, Christianity came and was developed long before the birth of graft and corruption in the government system.¹ In other words, the current Christian practices of going to church every Sunday, celebrating fiesta, and ob-

¹ I am convinced that this is true because our history suggests that the foreigners had dominated us in the name of Christian religion and that corruption was impossible to conceive in the motive of our beloved ancestors for they were so much compassionate with their fellow citizens and were longing for freedom from the oppressions of the foreigners.

serving rituals such as the seven sacraments for the Roman Catholics to name a few are ahead than the culture of corruption. Unfortunately, this kind of religiosity has not been successful in conquering self-serving motives.

It seems that to be corrupt is not only a tactic used in order to survive the economic crisis that threatens life in the present but also a strategy that is employed for future security. In this sense corruption is a means to an end. The end is described as a release from all forms of struggles for survival like poverty, sickness, if not martyrdom.

I am personally convinced that corruption is a kind of shared mentality that is conditioned by the instinct to survive, hence considered as a standard practice, a habit, a pattern or a system. However, this system stands in contradiction to the Christian ideals. The cultural value of *pakikisama* plays a crucial role in the proliferation of the culture of corruption. To be accepted in a group or community takes center stage in the context of present and future survival or security. This explains why Filipinos would generally compromise their Christian beliefs so as not to break one's self from the group.

Maybe somebody who reads this essay will think that I am too judgmental and prejudice reliant. Well, my assumption is simply triggered by the reality that our country is one of the most corrupt nations of the world.

Corruption is a negative word. It is a form of dishonesty and exploitation aimed at achieving personal gain. As mentioned above, I think one reason why our country is corrupt is due to compromise that is inseparable from personal interest. The practice of compromise sustains the government officials and employees in their desire to render services and loyalty to our country.

Ti, maano kamo da kay amo gid na iya! (What else can you do? This is the practice). This Ilonggo expression articulates what I mean when one enters into compromise. Regardless of the wrong practice one has no other choice but to follow or conform in order to maintain the ecology of human relations.

In our class, I have argued that honesty in the context of survival does not work in the end. People would rather think of their security and survival rather than believe in the virtue of honesty. What is of greater value to them is self-preservation and interest rather than the general welfare. Hence greediness has shaped the Filipino value not only personally but politically as well.

It is in this context that to practice the Christian idealism in a corrupt setting and culture is a difficult if not a risky task. To be a part of this system is like joining a game called "*let's pretend*." The mechanics of this game is secrecy and confidentiality between persons who share the same motive. The hidden motive must be kept confidential. And so pretending that everything is okay and "there's nothing wrong", one works out his hidden agenda with a great deal of skill and ability in order to hide the truth of the matter. This is the rule of the game. This is also the kind of game and rule that "Christian" government officials play.

Where have all the Christian virtues gone? This is the serious question that I am now struggling with.

In my own view, the Christian's sacred Scripture is pro-justice and pro-life. Its message is about a God-centered life. God calls his people to be a living testimony by demonstrating the "God-processed" life. The people of God should, by faith, live out the meaning of their beliefs in God. To be a Christian is not simply a matter of name and title. More importantly it is a matter of practice, a lifestyle.

The problem here in the Philippines I think is the separation of political life from religious life. More often than not we associate religion with pietism, spiritual, sacred tradition, mysticism, other-worldly, and pharisaic attitude to the non-religious or the so-called secular world. We see that kind of religious outlook in the Philippines. Actually Filipino Christians have collective practices that mediate between the Christian life and the community life or day-to-day life characterized by *sacred stories*, *sacred*

rituals, sacred time, sacred seasons, sacred sounds, sacred music, sacred speech, sacred silence, sacred images, sacred space, sacred journey, sacred laws, and sacred worship. The separation of the sacred from the ordinary is somehow a mentality that justifies corruption since this act is being done outside the realm of the sacred and the holy.¹ This idea has penetrated Christianity in the Philippines. Public service or duty is understood as a secular function, hence, corruption in the government has nothing to do with one's spirituality.

In view of this dualistic understanding of Christian and secular life which I believe to be very detrimental to the preservation of Christian values, there is a need to re-examine the Filipino's understanding of the purpose and meaning of life. In doing this, Christians should be vigilant in introducing a new culture or a counter culture to a culture of corruption. This new culture prioritizes life and social justice which can only be realized through concerted efforts and determination to introduce radical changes when one is in power.

I would like to suggest two possible expressions of counter-culture to address if not change the evil system or the culture of corruption. These ways are epistemological and practical. Epistemologically, Christians should change their world-view of the sacred and the secular. In the notion of God's Reign, God rules in all realms of life be they human or animals or plants. Every space, time, journey is not an isolated location and space.

Practically, Christians who possess this concern should not hesitate to extend the Christian vision of godly character (whatever it is) to every part of the nation. The church is not the only place for Sunday School classes. These classes take place even in political affairs when one is able to extend the power of Christian influence in the preservation of justice and promotion of quality life. It

¹ I only remember the time during the Hellenization period when the material world was regarded as separate from the spirit world.

is in these ways where community life is formed and myopic world-views are challenged. For me, it is in the emergence of this new culture or counter-culture of godly vision where the birth of a new system starts.

I believe this was what happened to the first century Christians. The life that Jesus had demonstrated formed a community, and then this community became influential, organized and powerful. It is without surprise that the first century world was turned up side down. That event shows that changes can be possible. However they only take place in the hands of the people who share the same vision and concern. The vision they share gave them the courage to transcend the old dysfunctional corrupt system and world-view they used to live by to a culture of pro-justice and pro-life.

There is hope for change. I believe that society can be changed only by corporate action. And this corporate action must not only be within the ecclesiastical structure, but also in all systems of both government and non-government. This vision of God proclaimed by Jesus should be taken seriously in all aspects of human life and situation even in human dreams.

The message of the Christian is “eschatological.”¹ This means that the awaited future-hope has already begun, namely, that the relationship between God and people is clearly realized and not simply a future event. This eschatological message has something to do with the Christian attitude towards life in the present. Such realization must abolish the boundary that creates a schizophrenia between spiritual things and material things. Since all situations and places are of God, then it must be understood that all are subjects of God’s vision. Those who claim to be Christians should seriously express this holistic vision. I suggest that this vision be grasped by our

¹ A term from the Greek root word “eschaton” which means “end times.”

fellow citizens and make this vision the foundation of organization and system.

May this vision fill them with a passion to preserve life and uphold justice. May the power of the *eschaton* dominate their acts and be the soul of the organization. Only then can one be a Christian in a culture of corruption.