

National Situationer: Roots of Conflict and Unpeace in the Philippines¹

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Local Values: Starting Point of Development

As I was reflecting on the topic assigned to me, I remember the book of Thiery G. Verhelst entitled *No Life Without Roots Culture and Development*, 1987 (Translated by Bob Cumming, 1990). The book emphasizes the significance of culture in any meaningful effort towards self-reliance. It claims that the Western development project has not only failed to save the poor countries from poverty but also dangerously increased their economic, political and cultural dependence, and in certain cases has accelerated the depletion of their natural resources and quality of life. Personally, I agree with the book's assertion that local values and knowledge should be the point of departure for a people-oriented alternative path of development. The assertion of Verhelst was made 15 years ago, but I think it is still relevant today. I, therefore, commend the organizers of this seminar and HEAVEN

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for taking another serious step towards integrating culture, especially peace culture across the curriculum on values education.

Our topic, National Situationer: Roots of Conflict and Unpeace in the Philippines clearly asserts in itself (which I hope all of us can agree) the presence of conflict and unpeace (and it is not saying directly whether there is or there can be harmony and peace in the Philippines sooner or later). What we wish to find out then are the sources of conflict and unpeace. If we are able to discover them, hopefully we will become more aware of the strategic causes of conflict and unpeace we are experiencing as a people. At the outset let us briefly survey our national situation, with the understanding that there are different perspectives in interpreting it, and then explore its significant roots manifested in history. Hopefully this could help us in trying to strengthen our strategic understanding of our situation; and enable us to incorporate such an understanding in our curriculum in teaching values education.

National Issues of Concern

In our *Ukay Baluskay*¹ TV program on January 8, 2002, we surveyed the opinion of our viewers on the question, "What is the most pressing issue in our country that needs immediate attention?" The first four issues (by rank) were the following: 1) poverty, 2) corruption, 3) unemployment, and 4) overpopulation.²

¹ *Ukay Baluskay* is a TV Program aired live everyday from Monday to Friday 8-9 pm (7-9 pm every Wednesday) over CPU Alumni Channel 25 of Cable Star, Inc.

² In 1990 a nationwide survey was conducted and the people declared that the seven issues that most affect their lives (by rank) were the following: ecology, graft and corruption, a weak economy, criminality, the population explosion, lack of spirituality, and injustice. See, Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Manila, 1992, p.275f.

Indeed, in spite of the pronouncements of our national leadership that there is an improvement in our national economy, poverty is growing because of insufficient income, decreasing purchasing power of the peso and joblessness. Consider the following data as reported in January 2002: 367 workers were retrenched daily from January to October 2001 as establishments continue to downsize or shutdown due to worsening economic situation; 2,400 Filipinos every day left the country to work abroad from January to October 2001, an indicator of domestic joblessness; Only 6% of Filipino families control 60% of total agricultural land. Our foreign debt is 52.43 billion dollars (as of 3rd quarter of 2001); As of November 2001 our government's revenues reached 508.9 billion pesos but its expenditures came to 653.5 billion pesos, which means a deficit of about 144.6 billion pesos.

Around 30 million Filipinos are in acute poverty. As of November 2001 the daily cost of living was 430 pesos (and in NCR 519.00, in agricultural areas 376.00 and non-agricultural areas 396.00). There was a drastic fall in foreign investments. The reason for this was the low investors' confidence in our economy. 6 out of 10 Transnational Corporations in the Philippines thought that our country is not a good location for investment. This is why the government is pushing for reforms to make the country more competitive in cornering foreign investments. The Trade and Industry Department is proposing to allow foreign corporations with \$500 million capital to enjoy tax holidays for 12 years. Favoring foreign capital slowly but surely displaced local investment.¹

¹ See Arnold Padilla, "The Economy Under Arroyo: No Glory after EDSA," in, IBON Economic and Political Briefing, IBON Foundation, Inc., Manila, 15 January, 2002, pp. 3-20.

Roots of Conflict and Unpeace

The data presented above are alarming. More and more people will be disenfranchised economically. This predicament is quite similar to the situation in the 1990s: “Viewed from the perspective of the great majority of God’s ‘anawim,’ life is full of ‘kahirapan’ (*kapit-os, karigatan*), of suffering. This state of affairs comes from having nothing or too little and results in an utter lack of stability and certainty in life. ‘Walang kaayusan ang bayan,’ the people say. Even for many of the very rich, life is empty, ‘walang kabuluhan.’ There is no order, no harmony in our society. Life is obstructed.”¹

The majority of the population – landless peasants, fisherfolks, and the labor force could not cope with the impact of liberalization and globalization policy. Poverty and alienation breeds social problems. It is said that graft and corruption is rampant at all levels of public institutions. Anti-social behaviour such as child abuse and paedophilia, rape, male and female prostitution, drug addiction and widespread gambling are prevalent. The search for “greener pasture” is on a large scale that traditional family values are rapidly breaking down. The trend to go abroad for economic reason means captivity and foreign bondage. “The impoverishment of the Philippines extends to its waters, land and other natural resources. Forests have been denuded, rivers and seas are over-exploited and dying because of human filth and industrial toxic waste. Agricultural produce are decreasing so that food and other commodities are purchased from other countries.”²

Our history tells us that conflict and the absence of peace are quite intertwined with our economic and politi-

¹ Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Manila, 1992, p.276.

² Josephine S. Doñgail and Rey M. Natividad, *The National Council of Churches in the Philippines: Towards a Common Vision and Mission*, 1998, 7-8.

cal system. Recently an analyst said that our country is experiencing economic crisis aggravated by the global economic crisis and terrorism by the Abu Sayyaf, which added to the country's political instability.

"The economic crisis was due to the bankruptcies experienced by the bulk of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors which had long been depressed by structural problems of foreign domination and backwardness. Globalization hastened this process as it displaced peasants and farmers, as well as small and medium entrepreneurs in favor of transnational corporations operating with the comprador landlords."¹

What are the roots of the crisis situation we are in today? It is the *injustices that have* been entrenched in our economic, political and cultural systems. They are death-dealing rather than life giving and are at the root of our people's *kahirapan*.² There is the presence of a *dehumanizing economic structures*, which caters to the few rich to the neglect of the majority who are poor – the Phil-

¹ Antonio A. Tujan, Jr., "Survival Economics and War," in, IBON Economic and Political Briefing, IBON Foundation, Inc., Manila, 15 January, 2002, p. 24. Many Philippine history books, though written in different perspectives would attest to foreign domination (with different names like colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and Western intervention) as a major player in interpreting Philippine culture and history and in perpetuating an unjust economic and political system which resulted to violent conflicts (revolts and revolutions) and the absence of peace. See for instance Teodoro Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People*, 1960; Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* 1975; and Reynaldo Ileto, *Filipinos and their Revolution Event, Discourse, and Historiography*, 1998.

² From here on I am following the facts presented by and analysis of Roman Catholic and Protestant writers found in the following: Fr. Thomas J. Marti, et al, *A Letter of Concern from U.S. Missionaries in the Philippines to the Christian Churches of the United States*, Davao City, 1986; Secretariat, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, Manila, 1992, p. 275f; Josephine S. Doñgail and Rey M. Natividad, *The National Council of Churches in the Philippines: Towards a Common Vision and Mission*, 1998, p5f. Though their analyses are not so current, I believe they are still valid.

ippines has one of the most unequal income distributions among middle income countries. This unjust economic situation is partly attributable to *inequitable ownership* of assets like land, *oligarchic power system*, *misconceived economic policies*, and *population growth*. The system of taxation is so designed that the poor has to pay more taxes. Agrarian reform is not well implemented. Payments for our local and foreign debt absorb around 40% of our national budget.

The worsening economic situation is closely reinforced by the political situation. Power is concentrated in the hands of a few (politicians, big businessmen, and the military). "There is a significant popular perception that external forces such as multinationals and political superpowers support this power concentration and tend to intervene to maintain the structure."¹ Political parties are seen as vehicles for personal ambition. "True, democratic tools such as elections are in place, but these continue to be dominated by traditional politicians representing the interests of the elite. The traditional 3Gs – guns, goons and gold – remain the arbiters of elections and governance."²

The ideological and cultural system presents different visions and programs ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right, using violent and non-violent means to either survive, cope or maintain their status. Armed struggle by the radical left, the radical right, the Muslims, and the government's counter-action have transformed conflicts on socio-economic, political and cultural conflicts into military conflicts.

However, in spite of the economic difficulties and political conflicts, there are good signs leading to a brighter future. There is a growing people's awareness and

¹ *Acts and Decrees...*, p.279.

² Josephine S. Doñgail and Rey. M. Natividad, *the National Council of Churches...*, p. 6.

movements towards a better economic and political life. For instance, more people have witnessed or participated in the ouster of a corrupt president during the EDSA Dos rally (People Power II).

In the cultural field our negative values are still prevalent like *bahala na*, *kanya-kanya*, *utang na loob*, *pakiusap* and *palakasan*. Colonial mentality, strengthened by media advertisements, entertainment, and the educational system itself continues to grip the Filipino mind.

The positive aspects of such cultural values, however, can be utilized in resolving conflicts and in realizing peace (shalom). Drawing from our collective political, economic and cultural strength, we can confront those forces dehumanizing us so that we could become instruments or facilitators for the restoration of shalom where our people enjoy the blessings of justice, peace, abundant life, human dignity, and the integrity of creation.¹

Reflection

In 1986, the American missionaries in the Philippines have this in mind so that the Philippine people can experience self-reliance and meaningful life.

“The political will of the Filipino people can prevail only if they are allowed to work out their own solutions to the problems of their country. Given the gravity of the Philippine situation, we believe that it is only through radical societal transformation in the direction of self-reliance, participative democracy and national sovereignty that the tremendous problems and injustices that exist can be solved. After centuries of colonial domination, Filipinos are striving to achieve just such a transformation of their society so that no one class

¹ Cf. Josephine S. Doñgail..., pp. 10-11.

will dominate and their economy can begin to serve all Filipinos rather than just a privileged elite and foreign interests.

The right of Filipinos to design a political system appropriate to their own needs should be respected. The emergence of a democratic and genuinely participative government representative of all Philippine sectors and classes would be hastened and revolutionary conflict averted, if our government would cease interventionist policies aimed at frustrating Philippine nationalist. Our government must come to accept the reality that nationalist feeling is now deeply-rooted among Filipinos, and that attempts to exclude nationalists can only prolong instability and civil strife.”¹

I believe our hope to change for the better can be achieved if there is an appropriate venue whereby we can comprehensively find solutions to the issues we are facing by using our own human and natural resources towards self-reliance and more participative way of life.²

¹ Fr. Thomas J. Marti, et al., *Letter of Concern from U.S. Missioners in the Philippines to the Christian Churches of the United States*, 1986, p. 22.

² Pastor Jalando-on asserts that the Philippines is facing a crisis. He cited the following data to prove his claim: “During Erap’s (Joseph Estrada) time, our foreign debt amounted to P1.5 trillion. When GMA (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo) took over, the debt ballooned to P3 trillion in 2003 and doubled to P6 trillion as of June 2004. Napocor’s share on the debt is P1.3 trillion. If you divide this to 85 million Filipinos, each of us has a foreign debt of about P70,000 pesos. Every year in our national budget, 40% is automatically set aside to pay the interest of our debt. This is called automatic debt servicing. Last year (2004), the Philippine government paid about P540 billion. To highlight this fact, the breakdown of our payment was 1.48 Billion Pesos a day, or 62 Million Pesos an hour, or 1.03 Million Pesos a minute. (See, Francis Neil G. Jalando-on’s sermon, *EXCEL for God’s Greatest Glory*, delivered on January 27, 2005 during the Christ Emphasis Week at the Rose Memorial Hall, Central Philippine University, Iloilo City, page 1) Rosario Bella Guzman asserts that the crisis continues. Thus the “people’s suffering was most severe” in 2004. Guzman identifies 10 key unresolved issues that will likely dominate the situation in 2005,

namely: 1) Oil, 2) Power, 3) Water, 4) Fiscal Crisis, 5) Taxes, 6) Prices, 7) Unemployment, 8) Wages, 9) Poverty, and 10) Mining. According to Guzman the Arroyo government listens to the advice of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and their partners and the U.S. government instead of hearing the people's demands. The Arroyo government places the "country at the altar of globalization with the Filipino people as the sacrificial lamb." Guzman, however, thinks that the Filipino people are fighting and they "have come to realize that it is the system – its rottenness and the rapacity of globalists, big business and landlords squeeze whatever is left of the rotten system – that needs to be changed. They have come to realize that the people's struggle is the wider arena where genuine changes can be achieved." (See, Rosario Bella Guzman, "Crisis Under Arroyo Rages People Bear The Brunt," In, *IBON Economic and Political Briefing*, 13 January 2005, pp. 1-24, quotations are from page 24). Mario Taguiwalo, citing the opinion surveys last November and December 2004 says that there is a growing pessimism among the people. High prices of commodities made life for ordinary people harder. There is also a growing trend among the more educated to migrate abroad. Taguiwalo also observed the worsening inequality among the people and the deterioration of the country's ecological balance due to polluted rivers and lakes. Hope is now a scarce commodity and the people's patience is wearing thin. Moreover, Taguiwalo says: "I do not see how the major initiatives and big ideas placed by this (Arroyo) administration on the nation's table thus far can significantly improve our long-standing fundamental socio-economic realities. Can the President lead the nation to finally make crucial steps to turn away from the more than 40 years of failure that came before her? Or will the masses lose heart in this elected government and turn elsewhere for their salvation soon?" The government has a different view. According to Rigoberto D. Tiglao, poverty had been reduced. "Despite all our problems and setbacks, the situation is not bleak. In 1985, 44.2 percent of households were below the poverty line. By 2000, according to the latest data available, this went down to 28.4 percent." (See, *Philippine Inquirer*, January 23, 2005, page A14)